Saturday, March 20, 2021 ₹ 75

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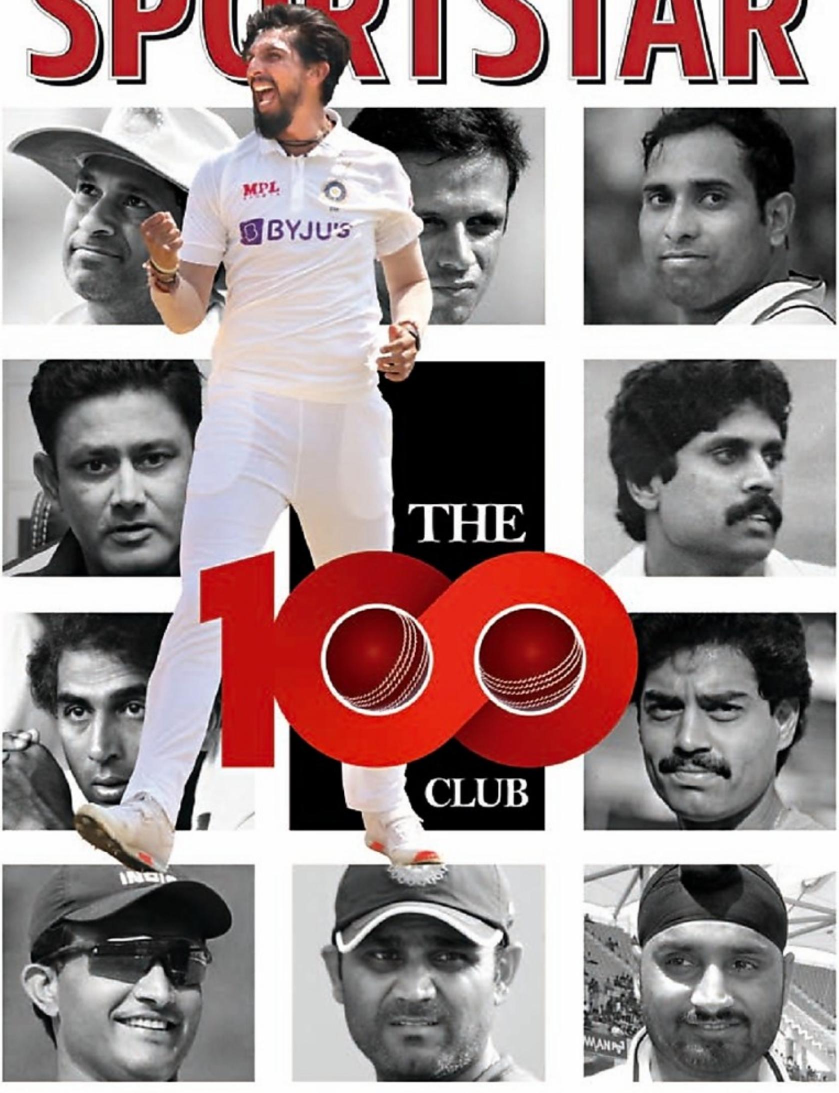
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THE 100 CLUB

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SPORTSTAR

Saturday, March 20, 2021
FOR THE FORTNIGHT MARCH 7-20, 2021

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GIANTS OF THE DECADE
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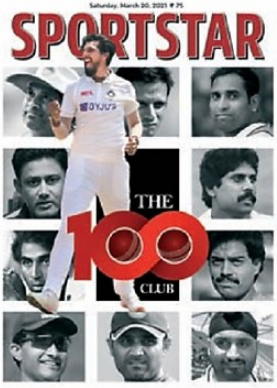

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THE 100 CLUB

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I like (LeBron James) a lot. He's phenomenal, what he's doing, but I don't like when people with a status speak about politics. Do what you're good at doing. I play football because I'm the best playing at football, I don't do politics. If I'd been a politician, I would be doing politics."

– AC Milan and Sweden striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic believes sportspeople such as Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James should quit sticking their nose into politics.

I would never shut up about things that are wrong."

– Basketball legend LeBron James responding to football star Zlatan Ibrahimovic's criticism of his political activism with a promise that he will never just shut up and dribble.

Okay Ibra, based on your position @KingJames is great at basketball and shouldn't voice his opinion about politics. You're really good at football so you shouldn't voice your opinion about LeBron using his platform for good. Or your opinion on anything outside football!"

– American sprint great Michael Johnson responding to Ibrahimovic.

IOC confirms Brisbane as preferred bidder for 2032 Olympics

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has announced that Brisbane was the preferred candidate to host the 2032 Games and said it would enter "targeted dialogue" with bid organisers. "The IOC future host commission recommended that the executive committee initiate a targeted dialogue with Brisbane and the Australian Olympic Committee for the organisation of the 2032 Olympic Games," said IOC president Thomas Bach. "The executive committee unanimously accepted this recommendation." Australia last hosted the Olympics in Sydney in 2000. The bid would be for the Games to be held in the state of Queensland, with Brisbane as the hub. There had been reported interest from India and Chinese city Shanghai, while Qatar last year confirmed it was planning to bid. A potential joint bid between South and North Korea had also been touted, while Germany had also expressed its interest in holding the Games in the North Rhine-Westphalia region. All those hopefuls were dealt a blow by the news on February 24, but Bach insisted the IOC had recorded "the interest of a number of parties," although he did not identify them. "It is not a decision against the other candidates, it is a decision in favour of a candidacy," Bach said. He clarified that no final decision on the host city had been made, but that "more detailed discussions" with Brisbane would start, although he gave no timetable. The bid would be focused around Brisbane and Gold Coast, which both already boast extensive sporting infrastructure. Gold Coast held the 2018 Commonwealth Games, while Brisbane boasts 21 sports venues.

Weightlifting's Olympic future in peril

International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach said on February 24 that weightlifting could be removed from the Olympic programme by 2024 if the sport's international federation continues to ignore requested reforms in the fight against doping. The International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) has been repeatedly rocked in recent years by positive drugs tests and accusations of corruption. The IOC has already previously threatened to remove its status as an Olympic sport. "The situation is becoming more and more grave, the executive committee expresses its extreme concern by the lack of significant changes with regard to the management and the culture within the IWF," Bach said. "Many requested changes have been ignored by the IWF despite all the warnings we issued. So the executive committee wants to be very clear by saying if these concerns are not addressed in a satisfactory and timely way, the IOC executive committee will have to review the place of weightlifting on the programme of the Paris 2024 and future Olympic Games." Despite the departure of its controversial president, Hungarian Tamas Ajan, the IWF has continued to be plagued by doping scandals. Last October, the World Anti-Doping Agency said 18 weightlifters from six countries were suspected of supplying false urine samples as WADA found evidence of "doppelgangers" being used to impersonate athletes.

Lleyton Hewitt, women's 'Original 9' named to Tennis Hall of Fame

Two-time Grand Slam winner Lleyton Hewitt has been named to the International Tennis Hall of Fame class of 2021, along with the Original 9 of the women's professional tour. The honour for former world number one Hewitt came on the Aussie's 40th birthday. Hewitt, who amassed 30 tour-level singles titles in his 18-year career, will be inducted in the Player Category. Not only was he elected by the Hall of Fame's official voting group of media, historians and Hall of Famers, he came first in a global fan vote that took place last year. Hewitt beat Pete Sampras in the final of the US Open in 2001 and ascended to No. 1 in the ATP rankings. Hewitt captured the Wimbledon title the following year and was a finalist at the Australian Open in 2005. "I am hugely honoured to be inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame," said Hewitt. "When you are competing, you're so focused on training and your results that week or that year, you don't really look ahead to something like this. But when that is all compiled up and deemed deserving of becoming a Hall of Famer, well, it's just the ultimate recognition for a player, and I'm so honoured," Hewitt said. The Original 9 of women's professional tennis — Americans Peaches Bartkowicz, Rosie Casals, Julie Heldman, Billie Jean King, Kristy Pigeon, Nancy Richey and Valerie Ziegenfuss as well as Australians Judy Tegart Dalton and Kerry Melville Reid — took action 50 years ago when they refused to accept the growing disparity in prize money and playing opportunities between women and men in tennis. On September 23, 1970 the Original 9 signed what would become iconic $1 contracts under the leadership of tennis promoter and World Tennis Magazine publisher Gladys Heldman in order to compete on their own terms, even though competing in their own non-sanctioned event threatened their careers. Their first event led to the creation of the Virginia Slims Circuit and set the stage for today's WTA Tour.

MOBIRA
DRIVER'S

Rally legend Hannu Mikkola dies at 78

Hannu Mikkola, the 1983 rally world champion and one of Finland's rally greats who earned the nickname the "Flying Finn" and international renown in a driving career spanning more than 30 years, has died. He was 78. Mikkola's son Vesa Mikkola, a former rally driver, tweeted on February 27 that "we lost my father Hannu to cancer this weekend. Most knew him as a rallying great who ushered in the golden years of the sport. To me he was dad." Mikkola started his driving career in Volvo cars in the early 1960s, but made his reputation driving a series of Ford Escorts in world rally events in the 1970s, including a win in the East African Safari Rally in Kenya in 1972 and a British Rally Championship in 1978. On his home turf, he won Finland's 1,000 Lakes Rally on seven occasions among other achievements. Mikkola was at the forefront of the four-wheel drive revolution in world rallying and claimed the 1983 title in an Audi Quattro, the first for an all-wheel drive car in FIA World Rally Championship history. He later teamed up with the Mazda team before retiring from professional motor sports in the early 1990s. Mikkola made 123 WRC starts — with a total of 18 wins — and continued to compete as a guest driver at a variety of events until 2017, WRC said in a statement following his death.

Braving the cold: Participants in the women's mountaineering sprint during the second Khelo India Winter Games in Gulmarg on February 27. Athletes from 27 States and Union Territories competed in the Games, which ended on March 2. The disciplines included alpine skiing, Nordic skiing, snowboarding, ski mountaineering, ice hockey and ice skating, among others. NISSAR AHMAD

Genial giant: Ishant Sharma is one of the most admired players among contemporaries.
SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

More than just a fast bowler

For Ishant Sharma, who played his 100th Test match recently, life on the cricket field has been a grand success story of determination and discipline. His love for Tests has helped India grow in stature.

VIJAY LOKAPALLY

He spent his childhood in the congested lanes of Ranji Nagar in west Delhi. He gained height rapidly and came to be acknowledged as someone "special." He looked a good prospect to play basketball — tall and wiry — even though he was not athletic. He still lacks that fluent movement of the body on the cricket field. Not the best of actions but 100 Test matches to his credit. For Ishant Sharma, life on the cricket field has been a grand success story of determination and discipline. His love for Tests has helped India grow in stature — Ishant last played in a One Day International in 2016 and has not played a T20I match since 2013.

He watched the skills of his fellow players and imbibed them. His childhood coach Sharvan Kumar recalled, "He was ever-ready to punish his body, bowling long spells at the nets. I have not come across a student who would not return the ball after a few overs during practice. The ball that I gave him would be used right through the afternoon, batsman after batsman. Ishant can be the most lovable trainee for any coach." His rise in Delhi cricket was rapid with his raw pace and ability to extract bounce. Batsmen would back away. We have seen that in first class matches — batsmen taking a step towards the square leg umpire as Ishant spat fire. "It was for real," remembered Mithun Manhas, his first captain in Delhi.

Ishant and Viat Kohli were two names who caught the attention on the local circuit. Virat's batting exploits matched the bowling skills of Ishant and they progressed to the State squad. It was not easy for Ishant though. Atul Wassan was the chairman of the selection committee that picked Ishant and Virat.

"It was in keeping with the Delhi cricket culture to keep the juniors waiting. Some of the selectors wanted to accommodate undeserving players and I just walked out of the meeting. I was fighting for Ishant to be picked," said Wassan. "I have been a cricketer and I know the meaning of recognition at the right time. I am happy Ishant grabbed the chance. His work ethics and discipline have carried him this far."

Ishant actually grabbed that chance firmly. With a spell of 34 overs and four wickets he made an impression on everyone present at the Feroze Shah Kotla from November 23 to 25, 2006. His first-class debut, against Tamil Nadu, was a precursor to his awesome potential. He had done well on the under-19 tour to Pakistan the previous month and was rightly backed by Wassan to play the Ranji Trophy.

"He was fast," said Tamil Nadu left-hander S. Sharath. "He was hitting the blind

One for the album: Ishant Sharma with his wife Pratima after he was presented with his 100th Test cap on day one of the third Test match. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

spot like Javagal Srinath, getting the ball to come in and he was the one wanting to preserve his energy. He bowled flat out and we were stunned by the bounce he got." In the years to follow, Ishant, who had an effective bouncer, excelled in straightening the ball to mix it with the one that came in or went out.

Wicketkeeper Vijay Dahiya has strong memories of Ishant in the first season. "I had seen him a lot in the nets and, believe me, he looked class. His forte was the bounce he got. His ball thudded into my gloves just as Srinath's. I also had to adjust to the late swing that he managed and it was not easy at his pace. The length that he commanded was brilliant and he has only grown in stature from that first day in Ranji Trophy."

Among those who watched Ishant's first-class debut was Dilip Vengsarkar, the man solely responsible for the young bowler to be fast tracked into the Indian team. Vengsarkar was the chairman of the National selection committee and had flown down to just watch Ishant. "We all knew he has the height and the pace and could be developed into a good fast bowler. That's the reason we took him to England (in 2007). I knew he won't get to play but he could have learnt from watching Zaheer Khan and Sreesanth. The debut against Bangladesh (a month before the England tour) was planned to make it comfortable for him. I am glad we were spot on in recognising Ishant's potential," said Vengsarkar.

Ishant never shirked. He would bowl tirelessly for hours in the nets, even to the tailenders. He always took his batting seriously. His batting coach, V. V. S. Laxman, was all praise. "I am most impressed by his commitment and passion. From the first time I saw him, his speed and bounce was the most noticeable factor. His fitness is amazing and he has really improved with every season. I know he loves the game so much and toils to excel for the team. It is not easy to bowl 20 overs a day right through your career."

Laxman agrees Ishant may have sacrificed white ball cricket to stay relevant and available for Test cricket. "He has never been dejected because his focus has been red ball cricket. I have played him in matches and at nets. Believe me, he could unsettle you with his pace and bounce. Not

Ishant in numbers

Tests - 100
Wickets - 303
Average - 32.20
Economy - 3.17
5-wkt hauls: 11
10-wkt haul: 1

HOME

Tests - 40
Wickets - 104
Average - 30.89
Economy - 2.90
5-wkt hauls: 2
10-wkt haul: 0

AWAY

Tests - 60
Wickets - 199
Average - 32.88
Economy - 3.32
5-wkt hauls: 9
10-wkt haul: 1

Fond memories: Delhi's captain Mithun Manhas (left) shares a light moment with Ashish Nehra and Ishant Sharma during a Ranji Trohpy game in 2006. Watching Ishant play his 100th Test, Manhas was so delighted. "He learnt the finer points from Zaheer and Ashish Nehra. He has become a thinking bowler now. His longevity is a tribute to his talent and, importantly, fitness. He is a complete cricketer for all seasons." THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

as sharp as Srinath when he brings the ball in but he can rattle the best. Remember the spell he bowled to Ricky Ponting in Perth in 2008. Ponting was at his peak but Ishant left him embarrassed, hitting the right length to keep him guessing. His first and last ball at the nets has the same speed and intensity. Wish he had developed the yorker."

For Laxman, it was Ishant's batting that also stood out at times. "He took his batting seriously. He had good technique and strong defence. It came from his mental toughness. In that partnership in Mohali (against Australia in 2010) I had back spasms and he also had some muscle injury. We were 92 runs from the target and just Ishant and Pragyan Ojha as my partners. I had faith in his batting and he assured he won't get out. I gave him strike without a worry. He contributed 31 and we won the match. Big credit to Ishant's commitment."

Ishant was fortunate to have been groomed by a captain like M. S. Dhoni. That he was a workhorse was well known and Dhoni exploited this quality to the hilt. Ishant was always there for the team and Dhoni knew how to use him with the new ball and the old too. Ishant's skill to reverse the ball came in handy when Dhoni wanted to rest a spinner. Ishant was game to bowl at any stage of the match and in all conditions. He was also good at creating the scuff marks.

It is credit to Ishant's dedication that he could withstand the rigours of international cricket for close to 15 years with the same intensity. What works for Ishant is his unpredictability. The best of batsmen are kept on toes when facing Ishant. Former India all-rounder and captain Kapil Dev said, "I am most impressed with his wrist position. He is able to set up the batsman and that is a great quality to have when playing international cricket. I can say from experience how tough it is to be where Ishant is today. He has been the strike bowler and a great asset with the old ball on lifeless pitches. Hats off!"

Some coaches advised Ishant to change his run up. They thought he ran in awkwardly. Bowled too many no-balls in the initial stages of his career. But he stuck to what Sharvan Kumar told him. "He is not a person to be swayed by praise. He comes from a middle-class background where values have been taught by the joint-family tradition. His grooming is strong and he just won't let go the lessons learnt from the hardships of his early days in cricket. He has used his experience well. I remember he was subjected to snide remarks at the Ranji Trophy trials but I just told him to ignore them. The batsmen who passed comments at those nets session were left in awe the same season. Ishant made them hop around during the practice sessions."

Ishant has come a long way from those days of struggle. "He uses his brains like

Go-to-man: Ishant was fortunate to have been groomed by a captain like M. S. Dhoni. That he was a workhorse was well known and Dhoni exploited this quality to the hilt. Ishant was always there for the team and Dhoni knew how to use him with the new ball and the old too. K. R. DEEPAK

Best student: Ishant's childhood coach Sharvan Kumar recalls, "He was ever-ready to punish his body, bowling long spells at the nets. Ishant can be the most lovable trainee for any coach."

few," said Rajat Bhatia, who played in that debut match of Ishant at the Feroze Shah Kotla. "He has developed his wicket-taking abilities well. He has learnt to control the swing, especially the lethal inswinger. He has learnt to reverse the ball (from Zaheer). Some people say he got the India cap too early but I always thought he had the mind-set of an international bowler."

Watching Ishant play his 100th Test, Ishant's first captain in first-class cricket, Mithun Manhas was delighted. "He learnt the finer points from Zaheer and Ashish Nehra. He has become a thinking bowler now. His longevity is a tribute to his talent and, importantly, fitness. His planning and execution is most professional because he has seen all the phases of cricket — white ball and red ball. I was his coach when he led Delhi and loved the way he showed interest in the future of the State. He is more than just a fast bowler. He is a complete cricketer for all seasons."

Former National selection committee

All praise: "It's a great achievement in modern-day cricket. To maintain your body and play 100 Tests, it's rare to see a pacer have such longevity these days," says Indian skipper Virat Kohli.
V. V. KRISHNAN

chairman M. S. K. Prasad has seen the best of Ishant. "For any Indian fast bowler to play 100 Tests is a phenomenal quality. With Umesh (Yadav) and (Mohammed) Shami he formed the most potent fast bowling trio. Ishant played the lead role and graduated from being a defensive to an attacking bowler. He was very good giving you breakthroughs."

It was hardly a surprise that Ishant married Pratima Singh, who comes from a family of basketballers. Off the field, Ishant is a calm and happy-go-lucky person, and complements the humble Pratima, whose sisters Prashanti, Divya and Priyanka have all represented India in basketball. As Prashanti, an Arjuna Awardee and Padma Shri, said of Ishant, "He is a very easy person in personal life with a simple agenda of *acha khana khao aur khush raho* (eat good food and stay happy). He calls me *dada* (big brother) since I met him in 2011. I am still the *dada* and he is very much adored in our extended family for his behaviour and politeness."

He is not built like a typical fast bowler — muscular and broad shouldered like most of the West Indians and the Australians. He is one of the most admired among contemporaries, an emerald green among the Indian fast bowlers, a most lovable exponent of the new and old ball. He is a rare bowler who can embarrass the batsman and the wicketkeeper with the same ball, beating them all ends, batsman with the swing and the wicketkeeper with the late swing.

Dhoni and Kohli have benefited from Ishant's ability to hit the opposition hard.

The other side: For V. V. S. Laxman, it was Ishant's batting that also stood out at times. "He took his batting seriously. He had good technique and strong defence. It came from his mental toughness. In that partnership in Mohali (against Australia in 2010) I had faith in his batting and gave him strike without a worry. He contributed 31 and we won the match. Big credit to Ishant's commitment."

K. R. DEEPAK

Kohli praised him profusely, "It's a great achievement in modern-day cricket. To maintain your body and play 100 Tests, it's rare to see a pacer have such longevity these days. He could have easily prioritised white-ball cricket but full credit to him that he didn't. A lot of people even lose their motivation. He has the skills, if he wanted he could have improved his four-over, 10-over cricket and played in the IPL regularly, or presented himself in T20s and ODIs. But he gave his full commitment to Test cricket. I couldn't be happier for him, to play in 100 Test matches as a fast bowler is no mean feat, especially playing in our conditions where things can get so difficult. But he persevered and kept working hard."

Kohli was right when he said, "To play 100 Tests for a fast bowler is as good as 150 Tests for a batsman." Ishant is a stalwart of Indian cricket.

Maybe not a fast bowler in pure sense but a delightful colleague to be proud of. As Ishant once told this writer. "Nothing excites me more than the ball hitting the stumps." He is 32 and can look forward to carrying on this business of hitting the stumps for some time now.

Test Championship is like a World Cup to me

"If we can play well and reach the Championship final and win, then, to me, it will feel the same as winning a World Cup or a Champions Trophy," says Ishant Sharma.

AMOL KARHADKAR

Success mantra: 'Keep working hard on your fitness, I'm sure you'll play longer'. That's how I think and that's what I've passed on to my team-mates as well," says Ishant Sharma. AP

Ahead of his milestone match — his 100th Test — Ishant Sharma discussed his 13-year-old journey in Test cricket in an interaction.

Can you recall the moment that defined your career?
I can't exactly specify a highlight. Obviously when you have a career spanning 14 years — and I'll continue playing — it's very difficult to point one highlight that changed my career.

If you look at any sportsman's career, the graph doesn't remain the same — it keeps going up and down. It's the same with me. So I can't pinpoint at one thing that led to the graph going up, or went down.

Can you explain your journey from being a youngster who learnt a lot from Zaheer Khan early on to now leading young Indian pacers?
Obviously it feels great. I learnt a lot from Zak, especially the work ethics. He always kept on telling me how important fitness is for a fast bowler. So I always keep that in mind and that's what I've told everyone in the team. 'Keep working hard on your fitness, I'm sure you'll play longer'. That's how I think and that's what I've passed on to my team-mates.

The spell to Ponting in Perth in 2008

and the Lord's Test in 2014 are among the cherishable moments in your journey. Can you recall your memories of these two days?

When I went to Australia in 2007 I was a youngster. I just used to bowl and wasn't thinking a lot — what to do, what not to do. Just like bowling in domestic cricket. When you play international cricket for a while, you learn about lengths, conditions and situations, and you try to adjust to that accordingly. In the Lord's Test, there wasn't anything special.

I always play with the motive of trying to win for the team. And as long as I play, the thing that motivates me is trying to win for the team. Obviously there will be personal milestones — when you are at the end of your career or retiring, then you can have a look at that. All these things, to be very honest, are just numbers for me. I don't play for numbers, I just play to win. (I play) according to what the team requires and always think how I can be useful for the team in tough situations. That is the only motivation for me — help the team in tough situations, break partnerships, etc — I only concentrate on this.

Do you think that being omitted from the limited overs' set-up has been a blessing in disguise in helping you reach the landmark?

I generally think that it is a blessing in disguise. Obviously I like to play white-ball cricket. A sportsman's goal is to keep playing. If he doesn't do that, all that he can do is to keep training. But I don't think of things like that. If I'm not playing one-day cricket then it shouldn't affect my Test cricket. At least I'm playing one format, I should be grateful about that. So I always think about doing well in whatever format I'm playing. If there are tough situations, I always believe thinking positively about it is better. You are grateful that you are performing in one format. It might be the reason I'm playing my 100th Test match but I don't believe that if I was playing all three formats then I wouldn't have played 100 Tests. I'm only 32, it's not like I'm 42. Maybe I wouldn't have played 100 Tests this soon if I had played white-ball cricket regularly. But I'm sure that considering the amount of time I've been playing and my fitness — the way I train and take care of my body — it (playing 100 Tests) wouldn't have been a problem for me.

From Rahul Dravid at the start to Virat Kohli now. Who is the captain you think understood you the most?

It's quite difficult to pick one 'who understood me the most'. Every captain played his part. I think it was more important that rather than the captain understanding me the best, I try to understand my captain and look at what he expects from me. If that communication is very clear, then it becomes easier for you in the team. So the more time you spend in the team, on the field and speak to him, you get to know [your part] and then things become easier. So I'd say understanding the captain has made things easier for me.

Can you tell us your high point and low point of your career — and what did it teach you?

I think, you — looking from the outside — can tell better what was the low phase and what was the highlight. I'm the same, I still enjoy playing cricket the same way as I used to before. That's why I am playing this sport — because I love this sport and not think about the highs and lows. When I say I enjoy the sport, I look at what I can do best to help my team win. I've always had one motive: how can I help the team win. If I was into analysing these things so much, I don't think I would have survived in the game so long.

Was the wait for your 100th Test frustrating (due to injury)?

No. Obviously I would have loved to go to Australia and played my 100h Test there but some things are just not in your control. COVID happened, and then the injury and I couldn't go to Australia. But the quicker you

India's 100-Test club

Ishant has become the second pacer, after Kapil, and the 11th Indian to play 100 Tests

Tests	
Sachin Tendulkar	200
Rahul Dravid	163
V.V.S. Laxman	134
Anil Kumble	132
Kapil Dev	131
Sunil Gavaskar	125
Dilip Vengsarkar	116
Sourav Ganguly	113
Virender Sehwag	103
Harbhajan Singh	103
Ishant Sharma	100

Dravid and Sehwag also played one Test for ICC World XI forget these things and move on in life, the better it is, and things gets simpler. This is my biggest learning in my career that if you can forgive and move on, it's easier rather than getting stuck about your past performances. That affects your performance in the next games as well. So, I try to forget everything and move on and focus on what's next at hand.

Since 2018, you have drastically improved on your average and strike rate. Which aspect of the skill set were you able to improve so well?

Nothing really. I just think I played too many Test matches in this period, outside India in particular, that's why you can say I've taken all these wickets. In India,if you don't bowl, how will you take wickets? Spinners rule the roost here and therefore tend to take more wickets, and when we go overseas, spinners have a different role. In India, fast bowlers have a different role. What is most important is that you understand what's your role in particular conditions. In the last few years we've played more Test matches abroad. So I've bowled a lot and just because of that I've gotten all those wickets.

No Indian pacer besides Kapil Dev has played 100 Tests. At what point did you realise you can do this? Also, you're only 32 — are you looking at Kapil's 131 Tests milestone?

No, 131 is quite far, to be honest. What I have on my mind is to help India win the next Test match. I'm only focussed on how to win this series and qualify for the Test Championship. As I always say, I have just this one format to play and this [Test Championship] is like a World Cup to me. So if we can play well and reach the Championship final and win, then, to me, it will feel the same as winning a World Cup or a Champions Trophy.

Do you plan to keep bowling at 38, like Anderson?

(Laughs) 38, it's too early to say that. I just go one game at a time. I don't really think too forward because you never know what comes next. So it's better to think about one game at a time. I understand my body and know what kind of training I need to do and I'm more professional regarding my recovery.

Earlier I used to train very hard but never thought about my recovery. As you grow older and bowl long spells, you need to look after yourself. So I'm looking after myself and everything paid off really well.

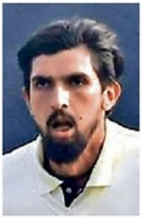
Playing against England — most Test wickets against them...

I don't look at the stats. I didn't know that I had taken most wickets against England. I just look at my preparation and the plans that we have against certain teams, we just stick to that.

Who do you think will carry forward your legacy among Indian pacers?

I can't name anyone. Whoever plays for India is talented, and has performed well in domestic cricket and IPL. If there is someone after me who will do well, it is Jasprit Bumrah because he has to lead the way for the youngsters. How he grooms youngsters and works with them will also matter. Saini has good pace, Siraj has good control. They are all different. You can't pinpoint one player and say that he will play for a long time. Everyone has a different skill set and different strengths. If you ask Saini to bowl in the same area all day, you won't be doing justice to his strength. If you ask Siraj to bowl at 140+ all day, you won't be backing his strength.

It is important to understand the strengths of each of the bowlers and their role in the team.



ISHANT IN TESTS

	M	Inns	Wkts.	BBI	BBM	Avg.	SR	5WI/10WM
vs. Australia	25	46	59	4/41	7/117	42.20	80.1	0/0
vs. England	20	33	62	7/74	7/135	31.83	63.0	2/0
vs. South Africa	15	27	31	4/79	5/73	43.51	86.1	0/0
vs. West Indies	12	23	46	6/55	10/108	23.91	47.8	3/1
vs. Sri Lanka	12	21	36	5/54	8/86	35.88	60.3	1/0
vs. New Zealand	7	13	35	6/51	9/162	24.14	42.5	3/0
vs. Bangladesh	7	13	25	5/22	9/78	20.88	38.8	1/0
vs. Pakistan	1	2	5	5/118	5/140	28.00	47.0	1/0
vs. Afghanistan	1	2	4	2/17	4/45	11.25	18.0	0/0

Picturesque: The teams before the start of the third Test match at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Pitch imperfect

Had it been for a better pitch – and better exhibition with the willow from both the teams – the fans would have revelled in enjoying the action over the weekend.

AMOL KARHADKAR

The brand-new stadium on the outskirts of the epicentre of Gujarat was the talk of the cricketing globe even before India and England arrived in the Bapuland after the Chennai leg of the four-Test series.

The buzz was understandable. After all, the erstwhile Sardar Patel Gujarat Stadium had been reconstructed into an ultramodern marvel, which could accommodate more spectators than any other cricket ground in the world. That too with a ring of fire, the circular arrangement of floodlights on the roof of the stadium, and four dressing rooms, a move ahead of its times considering the increasing number of double-headers in a game that's witnessing an evolution of shorter formats.

But by the time Rohit Sharma swivelled Joe Root into the mid-wicket stand barely 20 minutes after the dinner break on the second night, more than the glitzy stadium, it was the dusty surface that had emerged as the talking point.

During the build-up to the game, the likes of Rohit Sharma and Cheteshwar Pujara had stressed on the need to discuss cricket more than pitches. But with a treacherous strip being in offing at Motera, the surface understandably overshadowed the hype around the pink-ball and the sta-

Joy cut short: The fans who came in large numbers must have been disappointed with the match lasting less than two days.
SPORTZPICS / BCCI

dium, which was renamed as the Narendra Modi Stadium, ahead of the first day's play.

Yes, the spinners from both sides made optimum use of the conditions. Yes, the batting was mediocre, to say the least, with the honourable exception of Rohit and Zak Crawley. Still, it cannot be ignored that the pitch was far from an ideal surface for a Test match. The fact that the pace bowlers were taken out of equation early on in the game, thanks to craters formed at the landing area in the first hour of the game underlines that the pitch was far from getting all the elements of the sport into the game.

While England captain Root said the spectators were "robbed" of witnessing quality Test match, Rohit justified the turf, stressing it was a "nice pitch to bat on" and there were "no demons" in it.

The fact of the matter is no winning side is ever going to be critical of a pitch that has fetched it the result it desired for. Besides, no touring side in India, especially the one that has been far from being competitive with its batting, is going to be overtly critical of the pitch.

That the quality of the surface forced the debate around the extent to which a host nation should stretch its home advantage to resurface is enough to indicate it wasn't an ideal strip for an international game.

Thanks to the pitch, the fans were robbed of witnessing a swinging pink-ball contest between James Anderson and Virat Kohli. Also missing in action for virtually the whole game was India's fearsome pace duo of Ishant Sharma and Jasprit Bumrah. While the veteran was featuring in his 100th Test, the younger sensation was playing in India's whites in front of his home crowd for the first time in his career.

That aside, the Gujarati crowd seemed

Tough time: Zak Crawley of England is bowled by Axar Patel in the second innings. The spinners from both sides made optimum use of the conditions.

SPORTZPICS / BCCI

to have feasted during the limited time it could enjoy the match for.

So much so that a fan even jumped the fence and the non-existent security cover to sprint on to the playing area in what turned out to be a major breach of the biosecure bubble that the teams are in during the pandemic.

Had it been for a better pitch — and better exhibition with the willow from both the teams — the fans would have revelled in enjoying the action over the weekend. Considering the big occasion and the return of international cricket to Ahmedabad after more than six years, plenty of fans in and around the western States had descended on the city.

Such was the pitch that it helped England hide its lack of basic skills against spin. Despite the conditions, if England is to be competitive in Asia against top bowling sides like India and Pakistan, it will need drastic improvements in the skill-set to face quality spin attacks.

In that respect, it's a fair reflection that Root's army was out of the race for a berth in the World Test Championship after being bowled out for its lowest total against India.

As for India, the five-session win has resulted in Virat Kohli and Co. putting one foot in the final of the WTC. And with R. Ashwin and Axar Patel having tasted blood at Chepauk and feasting on it at Motera, one wouldn't be surprised if India continues to feast on the leftovers of England's meek surrender with a similar surface for the series finale.

Until then — and for the years to come — one hopes that the next time Test cricket comes calling to Ahmedabad after 2021, the match will be remembered for the quality of cricket rather than the 22-yard strip.

Towering presence: The new Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, with a capacity of 132,000 people, hosted the third Test between India and England. It was also the first men's international in the city since 2014. The stadium has four dressing rooms, six indoor pitches, two outdoor practice grounds with pavilions and the main ground illuminated with LED lights. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

The 100-Test club: Ishant Sharma, only the second Indian fast bowler to reach 100 Tests, celebrated with the early dismissal of England opener Dom Sibley, who edged one to slip in the third over, for a duck. Earlier in the series, Ishant had become the third Indian pacer, after Kapil Dev and Zaheer Khan, to get to the 300-wicket milestone in Tests. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

The Axar attack: Axar Patel's match figures of 11 for 80, including his third five-for in a row, were pivotal in India surging ahead. Axar accounted for Zak Crawley and Jonny Bairstow in the very first over of England's second innings, leaving the visiting side nought for two. Axar's wicket-to-wicket line became the most effective mode of dismissal on a pitch with unpredictable turn. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Hitman roars again: Rohit Sharma's fifty on day one was characterised by an impeccable judgement of length and superb shot selection on a deteriorating track. The highlight was a gentle clip through midwicket for four off Jofra Archer. Rohit was eventually dismissed for 66 off 96 balls. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Missed chance: Virat Kohli squandered yet another start, getting out for 27 in the last over on day one. It was a length ball from Jack Leach that skidded on and cramped Kohli for room. The Indian skipper, who was shaping to cut, could only chop on to his stumps.
SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Fantastic five: Joe Root claimed the first five-for by an England captain since Bob Willis in 1983 as India slipped from 98 for 2 to 145 all out. At one stage during India's first innings, Root had picked three wickets in three overs without conceding a run. He finished with figures of 5 for 8.
SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Star turn: Jack Leach triggered India's slide on the second afternoon. Shortly after Rohit Sharma and Ajinkya Rahane had guided India into the lead without alarm, Leach struck Rahane on the knee roll in front of off stump. Moments later, the left-arm spinner trapped Rohit lbw to push India on the backfoot. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Scaling new heights: Ravichandran Ashwin became the second-fastest ever, after Muttiah Muralitharan, to 400 Test wickets during England's 81 all out in the second innings. Ashwin reached the milestone in his 77th Test while the Sri Lankan got to the 400th Test wicket in his 72nd Test match. Ashwin is also the fourth Indian to reach the landmark of 400 Test wickets. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Not again: It was the 11th time Ben Stokes had been dismissed by Ravichandran Ashwin. Stokes was countering the spinners with his conventional and reverse sweeps until his nemesis trapped him in front with one that went straight after pitching. With Stokes gone for 25, England's hopes of a 100-plus lead were also up in smoke. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Drawing criticism: India's comprehensive win well inside two days, with spinners taking 28 of the 30 wickets to fall, has put the Ahmedabad pitch under the scanner. Such was the impact that Indian captain Virat Kohli termed it as the most "bizarre" Test he had been part of. While Kohli called it a "very good" wicket, former England captain Andrew Strauss felt the "balance between bat and ball on this pitch" was skewed "just too much in the favour" of the spinners.

SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Over in a flash: Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill knocked off the 49 runs India need to win as the Ahmedabad pink-ball Test became the shortest completed match since 1935. The third Test, which lasted only 842 balls, is currently the seventh shortest completed Test match.

SPORTZPICS / BCCI

All smiles: The 10-wicket win in Ahmedabad gave India an unassailable 2-1 lead in the four-Test series, while taking it a step closer to the inaugural World Test Championship final, to be played at Lord's from June 18. Australia will set up a final against New Zealand if England – now out of the race – wins the fourth Test. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

ON THE WRITE LINE

SUNIL GAVASKAR

Blame the batting ability, or the lack of it

In the last 10 years England were dismissed for sub-100 totals six times (twice at home), Pakistan and South Africa four times and Australia, New Zealand and Sri Lanka thrice each and Bangladesh, India and Zimbabwe twice each with West Indies and Ireland once each.

For the love of cricket: Fans enjoying the proceedings during day one of the third Test match at the Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

The first match at the magnificent Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad finished in less than two days. Since it was a game that was to be partly played under the lights and with a pink ball there was speculation that the match won't last the full five days, much like most Test matches nowadays. Nobody, though, could have predicted that the game would get over in under two days.

Of course, in such a situation there would be a lot of talk about the pitch. While there was the expected criticism from the one-eyed supporters of English cricket, the England captain Joe Root and his players have not said a word, leaving it to the ICC to take a call on the quality of the pitch. Full marks to Root for doing that as otherwise he would have been perceived as another whingeing Brit. In any case how can a team that has won the toss and been just two wickets down at 74 runs, complain about the pitch? Those two wickets had nothing to do with the pitch. Dom Sibley, the opening batsman, was out to a terrific outswinger from Ishant Sharma to give the tall pacer a wicket in his 100th Test match and Jonny Bairstow played for turn and was trapped leg-before wicket to local boy Axar Patel. So, clearly the pitch had nothing to do with the batsmen losing their wickets. Then Joe Root played back to a full length ball and was trapped leg before and Ben Stokes played down the wrong line and was bowled. Pope had no idea of the floater from Ashwin that went straight through to knock his off-stump back and he was bowled in a similar fashion in the second innings too, this time with Ashwin bowling over the wicket. So the top six were out to deception and not the pitch. The same story pretty much happened with them in the second innings where they were deceived into playing down the wrong line and getting bowled or leg before wicket. Not one wicket fell where the ball exploded off the surface or scooted along the ground and yet the pitch is being blamed. If people want the ball to come straight at an even bounce — delivery after delivery — they should go watch indoor

C PUJARA
25
BYJU'S

Familiar sight: Members of the Indian team celebrate the fall of a wicket during the Test. The English batsmen were caught in a spin web and were bundled out cheaply in both innings.
SPORTZPICS / BCCI

cricket on artificial turf.

England's rotation policy didn't help. After winning the first Test match they went into the second match with both their pace bowling spearheads missing. Jofra Archer had an injury and so he was not considered. But it's here that England should not have been rigid with their rotation policy and picked Anderson who had bowled beautifully in the second innings of the first Test. There was a week's gap between the second and third Test and that should have been enough rest time for Anderson or anybody who wants to represent his country. The Indians seeing Anderson and Archer missing would have heaved a sigh of relief. Then Moeen Ali who bowled and even batted well in the second Test was sent home because of the workload management rotation policy. Mind you he had played just that Test match so the workload should never have been a consideration anyway. But again the rigidity and inflexibility of the rotation policy meant that he had to go home. Speaking of workload management... how about the workload of skipper Joe Root who has reeled off two double hundreds and a near double and has also bowled in the five Test matches so far? Not to forget the pressures and tensions of captaincy on an overseas assignment. Why isn't he being sent home to rest when clearly he has had the heaviest of workloads?

Isn't it regularly drilled into us that today's cricketers are stronger and fitter than those of the past? Then why do these stronger and fitter cricketers need the break so often? The past cricketers may not have been as athletic and strong as the current ones but they had stronger minds which allowed them to make up for any physical deficiencies and carry on playing in rain and shine simply for the joy, pride, honour and privilege to represent their countries.

By the way, in the last 10 years England were dismissed for sub-100 totals six times (twice at home), Pakistan and South Africa four times and Australia, New Zealand and Sri Lanka thrice each and Bangladesh, India and Zimbabwe twice each with West Indies and Ireland once each.

In the last five years England have been dismissed five times under 100 (twice at home) and to narrow it further, in the last three years England have been knocked over five times under 100 and six other sides once each.

Maybe, just maybe, it's the batting ability or the lack of it and not the pitches that need to be blamed.

Ashwin joins the 400 club

16

The number of bowlers to take 400 Test wickets or more, with R. Ashwin becoming the latest to do so during the third Test against England in Ahmedabad. By reaching the landmark in his 77th match, Ashwin became the second quickest after Sri Lanka's Muttiah Muralitharan, who required 72 games. Ashwin is the sixth spinner to reach the mark after Shane Warne (August 2001), Muralitharan (January 2002), Anil Kumble (October 2004), Harbhajan Singh (July 2011) and Rangana Herath (October 2017). For the record, Ashwin took nine years, three months and 20 days (a total of 3,400 days) to get to 400 wickets. Only Australia's Glenn McGrath did it quicker — in eight years, 11 months and 10 days (3,266 days).

Quickest to 400 Test wickets

Test	Innings	Bowler	Country	Achieved on	Wickets #	Average #	Strike rate #	Opponent	Venue
72	117	Muttiah Muralitharan	Sri Lanka	January 15, 2002	400	23.71	60.15	Zimbabwe	Galle
77	144	R. Ashwin	India	February 25, 2021	401	24.95	53.01	England	Ahmedabad
80	140	Richard Hadlee	New Zealand	February 4, 1990	403	22.12	50.75	India	Christchurch
80	149	Dale Steyn	South Africa	July 30, 2015	402	22.49	41.58	Bangladesh	Mirpur
84	153	Rangana Herath	Sri Lanka	October 2, 2017	400	27.82	59.59	Pakistan	Abu Dhabi
85	148	Anil Kumble	India	October 6, 2004	400	28.40	67.21	Australia	Bangalore

At the end of the innings in which the landmark was achieved.

Note: Although, Muralitharan is the quickest to in terms of Tests and innings, Dale Steyn's balls per wicket (41.58) at that stage was the best among all the 16 bowlers with 400-plus wickets.

18

The number of wickets taken by Axar Patel is now the second most by an Indian bowler after the first two Test matches of his career. Narendra Hirwani holds not only the Indian record, but the overall one too with 24 wickets at the end of his second Test in November 1988. After a record 16 wickets on debut against the West Indies in Madras in January that year, Hirwani went on to claim another eight in his second game against New Zealand in Bangalore.

Most wickets by Indian bowlers after playing two Test matches

Wickets	Bowler	Average	Strike rate	Five-wicket innings/Ten-wicket matches	Best bowling figures	Year
24	Narendra Hirwani	10.71	23.71	3/1	8/61	1988
18	Axar Patel	9.44	25.89	3/1	6/38	2021
13	Shivlal Yadav	13.92	34.85	0/0	4/35	1979
13	Venkatesh Prasad	19.31	45.92	1/0	5/76	1996
13	R. Ashwin	24.15	47.31	1/0	6/47	2011
12	Laxman Sivaramakrishnan	23.00	51.17	2/1	6/64	1983-84

Note: Sivaramakrishnan went wicketless in his debut Test in April-May 1983 but claimed 12 wickets in his second match in November-December 1984.

Spinning a web: After taking seven wickets on debut, Axar Patel took another 11 in his second Test match, against England in Ahmedabad.

SPORTZPICS / BCCI

22 **The number of matches in Test cricket history** that were completed within two days. India's win over England in Ahmedabad was its second such victory after it defeated Afghanistan on the second day of the latter's inaugural Test match in Bangalore on June 15, 2018. Ahmedabad, meanwhile, became the 14th venue to witness a two-day Test.

A summary of all 22 two-day Test matches

Winnings teams		Losing Teams		Host country		Venue	
Team	**Occasions**	**Team**	**Occasions**	**Country**	**Occasions**	**Ground**	**Occasions**
England	9	South Africa	7	England	9	The Oval, London	4
Australia	8	England	4	South Africa	7	St George's Park, Port Elizabeth	3
South Africa	2	Australia	3	India	2	Newlands, Cape Town	3
India	2	Zimbabwe	3	Australia	1	Old Trafford, Manchester	2
New Zealand	1	West Indies	2	New Zealand	1	Lord's, London	1
West Indies	0	New Zealand	1	Zimbabwe	1	Trent Bridge, Nottingham	1
Pakistan	0	Pakistan	1	UAE	1	Melbourne Cricket Ground	1
Sri Lanka	0	Afghanistan	1	West Indies	0	Old Wanderers, Johannesburg	1
Zimbabwe	0	India	0	Pakistan	0	Basin Reserve, Wellington	1
Bangladesh	0	Sri Lanka	0	Sri Lanka	0	Headingley, Leeds	1
Ireland	0	Bangladesh	0	Bangladesh	0	Sharjah Cricket Ground	1
Afghanistan	0	Ireland	0	Ireland	0	Harare Sports Club Ground	1
						M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bengaluru	1
						Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad	1

4 **The number of times England has been defeated in a Test** within two days. The last time before the Ahmedabad Test was nearly 100 years ago — in the Ashes at Trent Bridge, Nottingham, in May 1921!

England's two-day Test match defeats

Date	Venue	Opponent	Lost by
August 28-29, 1882	The Oval, London	Australia	7 runs
July 26-27, 1888	Lord's, London	Australia	61 runs
May 28-30#, 1921	Trent Bridge, Nottingham	Australia	10 wickets
February 24-25, 2021	Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad	India	10 wickets

Note: May 29, 1921, was the rest day.

140.2 **The number of overs bowled in the third Test match** between India and England in Ahmedabad is the seventh fewest among completed Tests. However, it was the fewest since the Bridgetown Test between the West Indies and England in January 1935 — more than 86 years ago.

Fewest overs bowled in a completed Test match

Overs (balls)	Home team	Visiting team	Venue	Month/year	Result
109.2 (656)	Australia	South Africa	Melbourne	February 1932	Australia won by an innings and 72 runs
112.0 (672)	West Indies	England	Bridgetown	January 1935	England won by 4 wickets
131.2 # (788)	England	Australia	Manchester	August 1888	England won by an innings and 21 runs
132.0 # (792)	England	Australia	Lord's	July 1888	Australia won by 61 runs
132.4 # (796)	South Africa	England	Cape Town	March 1889	England won by an innings and 202 runs
135.5 (815)	England	South Africa	The Oval	August 1912	England won by 10 wickets
140.2 (842)	India	England	Ahmedabad	February 2021	India won by 10 wickets
145.2 (872)	New Zealand	Australia	Wellington	March 1946	Australia won by an innings and 103 runs

# Test matches with four-ball over. A total of 197 four-ball overs were bowled at Manchester, 198 at Lord's, and 199 at Cape Town. For the above table, the overs have been converted to six balls.

145 **India's first-innings total in the third Test** in Ahmedabad is now the second lowest for the country in a winning cause. The lowest still remains the 104 the side made against Australia in Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium, when it won by 13 runs.

Lowest totals for India in a winning cause

Total	Innings	Opponent	Venue	Month/year	Result
104	1	Australia	Mumbai (Wankhede)	November 2004	Won by 13 runs
145	2	England	Ahmedabad	February 2021	Won by 10 wickets
152	1	Australia	Kanpur	December 1959	Won by 119 runs
155	3	England	Calcutta	January 1973	Won by 28 runs
156	1	New Zealand	Mumbai (Brabourne)	September 1969	Won by 60 runs

All records are updated after the end of the third Test match in Ahmedabad on February 25.

Still in demand: Despite an abysmal outing with Kings XI Punjab last season and consequently released by the franchise, there was an intense bidding war for Glenn Maxwell. SPORTZPICS / BCCI

Mini auction, big buys

SHAYAN ACHARYA

These days, rather than gunning for big names, the IPL franchises prefer players who are potential match-winners. The 2021 auction was no different.

Mike Hesson was quite blunt when asked about Royal Challengers Bangalore's (RCB) decision to rope in Glenn Maxwell for this year's Indian Premier League (IPL). A former New Zealand coach and now RCB's director of cricket operations, Hesson said his team wanted a player with the X-factor, which is why it picked the Aussie for a whopping ₹14 crore.

Considered a game-changer in cricket's shortest format, Maxwell had an abysmal outing with Kings XI Punjab last season, and consequently he was released by the franchise — which has now been rebranded Punjab Kings — ahead of the February 18 auction. Despite that, there was an intense bidding war for Maxwell when the eight franchises gathered in Chennai.

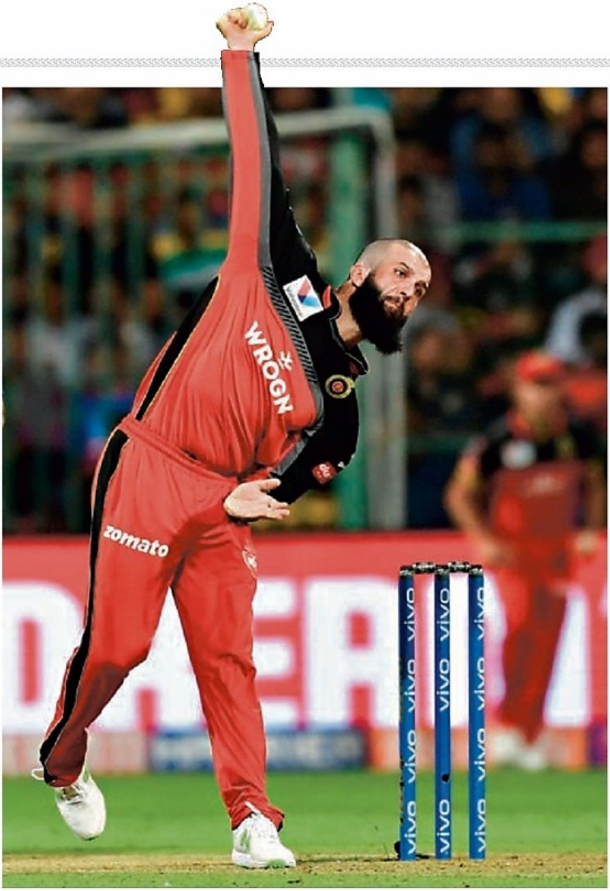
And that has been the trend in the IPL auction over the years: Teams are always ready to spend big money on "utility players" who they trust.

After the first few editions of the tournament, as one franchise insider points out, the teams realised that too much chopping and changing of the core group could be disruptive for them. These days, rather than gunning for the big names, the franchises prefer players who are potential match-winners.

The 2021 auction was no different as RCB and Rajasthan Royals went big on overseas all-rounders. While the latter roped in South Africa's Chris Morris for a record ₹16.25 crore, RCB signed New Zealand pacer Kyle Jamieson for a massive ₹15 crore.

"Our focus was on the availability of players to bowl upfront and, more importantly, at the death. The fact that Morris can also win games batting at No. 8 is a value addition. But his bowling ability was the key factor," Rajasthan Royals chief operating officer Jake Lush McCrum said.

Even the team's director of cricket operations and former Sri Lanka captain Kumar Sangakkara suggested that Morris has a spe-



Filling the gaps: Chennai Super Kings came into the auction with a purse of ₹19.90 crore and a clear strategy – to find suitable replacements for Harbhajan Singh and Kedar Jadhav. The franchise played it smart and roped in England all-rounder Moeen Ali (left) and Indian spinner Krishnappa Gowtham for ₹7 crore and ₹9.25 crore, respectively.

K. MURALI KUMAR

cific role in the side – to back key pacer Jofra Archer. The South African, who has had successful stints in previous editions of IPL, has been struggling with injuries, but the franchise is confident his experience will come in handy, and that's why it did not think twice before signing him for a record amount.

"This being a mini auction, the idea for the franchises was to fix the loose ends, and that's what they have done. When you have a big purse and a wide talent pool, things could get challenging. But in smaller auctions, only a few fetch big money," said one franchise boss. That is evident from the fact that the franchises primarily opted for overseas cricketers, and all-rounders predominantly – which explains why Australia's Aaron Finch and Englishman Alex Hales found no takers.

Chennai Super Kings came into the auction with a purse of ₹19.90 crore and a clear strategy – to find suitable replacements for Harbhajan Singh and Kedar Jadhav. The franchise played it smart and roped in England all-rounder Moeen Ali and Indian spinner Krishnappa Gowtham for ₹7 crore and ₹9.25 crore, respectively. It also signed

POSTER

Young blood: Punjab Kings took a calculated risk by roping in Australia's Jhye Richardson for ₹14 crore. AP

Cheteshwar Pujara for ₹50 lakh.

"Moeen is a proven performer when it comes to T20s, and he is someone who gives many options to the batting order. He can bat left-handed in the middle order or in the top order as a batsman alone, and then he can be an off-spin option," said CSK bowling coach Lakshmipathy Balaji, who was present for the auction.

"He has a very important skill when it comes to T20 — to start with the new ball and also bowl in the key phases. Moeen adds a lot of value," said the former India fast bowler, adding: "There are hardly any off-spin all-rounders in the IPL, and Moeen coming in adds value."

Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) adopted a similar strategy, making the most of its limited purse by roping in star Bangladesh all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan for just ₹3.25 crore. The franchise, which is co-owned by Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan, also roped in Harbhajan for his base price of ₹2 crore – a smart buy considering that the KKR bowling line-up looked jittery last year.

"We were just looking to fill some specific gaps, and for us, bringing Shakib back to KKR was a big thing. From an experience point of view, towards the end, we had the opportunity to bring Harbhajan back. There is a lot of experience in bowling... The focus of the think tank was a bit towards experience, and from that perspective, we were very happy," KKR chief executive Venky Mysore said.

While some of the franchises preferred to add experienced campaigners to their rosters, Punjab Kings took a calculated risk by roping in Jhye Richardson for ₹14 crore and the uncapped Riley Meredith for ₹8 crore. For the team, the idea was to strengthen the weak links and the think tank was happy to rope in the seasoned Moises Henriques for ₹4.2 crore and Tamil Nadu cricketer Shahrukh Khan for ₹5.25 crore. The franchise had relied heavily on "mystery spinners" in the past, but that strategy hasn't quite worked. This time, the rebranded team instead went for "smart buys," and its director of cricket, former India captain and coach Anil Kumble, is happy with the recruits.

However, with no clarity on the venues, it was quite a challenging task for the franchises to pick suitable players, but they banked on their experience and went for flexible squads that could be suitable in any conditions. "You have to take that amount of risk. That's the challenge," said one team owner.

That the teams were cautious with their choices was evident from the fact that Steve

Playing it safe: That the teams were cautious with their choices was evident from the fact that Steve Smith hardly found any takers and was signed by Delhi Capitals for ₹2.2 crore. PTI

Smith hardly found any takers and was signed by Delhi Capitals for ₹2.2 crore. While others were surprised, industry experts thought it was quite the expected move. "Look, when teams settle for a player, they keep a lot of factors in mind. Smith is a great player, but his record in T20s has not been exceptional, and also his stint as the captain of Rajasthan Royals was forgettable. So, it is a proven fact that Smith – despite all his experience – still hasn't mastered the format," noted an industry expert who has been following IPL trends since the tournament's inception in 2008.

The IPL's mini auctions at times can be quite tricky. But with the core group settled, most franchises made calculative moves, with Mumbai Indians ending the auction by roping in Arjun Tendulkar at his base price of ₹20 lakh.

The son of the legend has been with the Mumbai outfit for a while as a net bowler, and the franchise think tank believes the environment will help him grow as a cricketer. After all, that's what the IPL has done over the years: it has unearthed innumerable young talents! ☒

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New normal: Former India internationals Ajit Agarkar (left) and Deep Dasgupta on commentary duty during IPL 2020. "You have to accept the way things are right now. Yes, it is challenging, but then, you also have friends like Ajit and Kartik (Murali) and Sunny sir (Sunil Gavaskar) for company," says Dasgupta. TWITTER / DEEP DASGUPTA

Part of the job

Much before a tournament begins, the broadcaster ensures that the commentators go into quarantine and get tested at regular intervals. Once the quarantine is over, they are allowed to enter the bubble. Just like the players, they too are not allowed to step out of the bubble and meet outsiders – and a breach means going back to quarantine again.

SHAYAN ACHARYA & VIJAY LOKAPALLY

Breakfast in Vadodara, lunch in Chennai and dinner in Delhi! Not long ago, that's how many would describe the life of cricket commentators in the country. And why not! After all, they would start their day in one city, call a match in another and then take the last flight home. It was challenging for sure, but the commentators — most of them former India cricketers — enjoyed this fast-paced life.

But things have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the players need to get inside a bio-bubble, it is a similar story for commentators. Much before a tournament begins, the broadcaster ensures that the commentators and the entire crew — camerapersons, technicians, producers and all others required for daily television production work — go into mandatory quarantine and get tested at regular intervals.

Once the quarantine period is over, the commentators are allowed to enter the bubble. Just like the players, they too are not allowed to step out of the bubble and meet outsiders — a bubble breach means going back to quarantine again. The daily routine is quite simple — go to the ground or the studio and return to the bubble. It gets monotonous for sure, but the commentators have slowly come to terms with the "new normal."

Former India spinner Kartik Murali is a "veteran" of bio-bubbles. "We all dreaded it in the beginning, but it is a part of life now. As professionals, we need to accept the tough part of the job and this bio-bubble is extremely challenging. You have to learn to live by yourself. It can get lonely no doubt, but you have to find ways to stay focused," he says.

To tackle the bio-bubble, Kartik relies

on his love for spirituality. "I have my books. I re-read the Shri Sai Satcharitra. I carry other books too, but books on spirituality give me strength. Of course, you have movies to watch and music to listen to, but nothing like a book."

Kartik has experienced the bio-bubble and COVID-19 tests since April 10 when he was preparing for the 2020 Indian Premier League (IPL) in Dubai. "I have adapted to the bio-bubble requirements. I have had about 50 tests, I have got used to them now."

Former India wicketkeeper-batsman Deep Dasgupta was in the United Arab Emirates for nearly three months for the IPL and is currently engaged in the India-England series. Over the last six months, Dasputa has undergone "at least 40-45" Covid tests in the bubble, but he is happy to be back in action — albeit with the microphone.

"It is tough. Earlier, you could head home in between the matches. But you are taken care of, and it's a job that we love doing. So, it is what it is," Dasgupta says.

Challenging times: Former India spinner Pragyan Ojha, who was part of the commentary panel for the knockout stage of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy in Ahmedabad in January, admits that if one stays inside the bubble for longer, it could get a bit challenging.
K.V.S. GIRI

While this is a new experience for him, Dasgupta admits there needs to be a "shift in the mindset." "You have to accept the way things are right now. Yes, it is challenging, but then, you also have friends like Ajit (Agarkar) and Kartik and Sunny sir (Sunil Gavaskar) for company. You are allowed to meet each other inside the bubble, so that's a good thing," he says.

On match days, there is a rush to reach the venue from the hotel and then get ready to go on air, but things are quite slow-paced on off days. "You get to spend a lot of time with yourself, then make phone calls at home — speak to parents, the family. You also end up watching a lot of shows and films on OTT (over-the-top) platforms."

The "good part," according to Dasgupta, is the fact that the bubble life has helped him develop stronger bonds with members of the unit. "There is a place for meals, where you meet the people, chat, and that also helps you in making your own schedule. Earlier, you would mostly interact with your fellow commentators and a few others. But now, since everyone is inside the bubble, it is like a family," he says.

"The breakfast goes on for an hour and a half, and you chat with your colleagues. The gym is also open, so you can go there and do some fitness training. You slowly get used to this life. But perhaps, the only thing is you do not get to meet the family for a long time."

Just like the cricketers, even the commentators have bad days in office. In an ideal world, they would just cool their heels with a good meal or catch up with friends and family. But the bubble life does not allow that. So, what's the way to regroup?

"As a player, if you have not done well on a particular day, there would be teammates who would lift your mood. Here too you have friends around and the best part is I am very close to this lot. Sunny sir, Kartik and I have been colleagues for long. Even with Ajit – I go back a long way, since our under-19 days. You become closer with the time and they become your support group. That's what has happened here, too," Dasgupta says. "We were in Chennai for three weeks. It was the same room and the same set of people. It's the same in Ahmedabad as well..."

"The bio-bubble was very tough, especially being away from the family for so long," says former India fast bowler and commentator Irfan Pathan, who was in the bio-bubble in Mumbai for nearly three months during IPL 2020. "At that time (August-September), we had a mandatory 14-day quarantine, so it was not easy to stay inside the same room. Now, obviously the number of days for quarantine has gone down, and you can step out of your room after a week. But back then, two-week quarantine was quite challenging. I did training inside the room, watched television, read up a little – but when work started, we were busy. We got used to the new normal and slowly, we started training near the pool area."

"Of course, the most challenging bit was that I was missing my family, especially my four-year old son. I had never stayed away from him, so it was the toughest thing, but we managed it," he added.

Former India spinner Pragyan Ojha was part of the commentary panel for the knockout stage of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy in Ahmedabad in January. While things were fine with him, Ojha admits that if one stays inside the bubble for longer, it could get a bit challenging.

"At times, it could get strenuous because there are restrictions and you cannot move out. It is a very different challenge and nobody would have thought about it. You need a time off for yourself, and in normal times, one could just go out for a meal or maybe go and watch a movie," Ojha says.

"Yes, now you are staying in good hotels, there is good food. You can watch OTT. But you are confined to the hotel room and cannot step out. So that is something that is tough and very challenging," the former India cricketer adds.

"Inside the bubble, the rules are similar for everybody. We all were used to a certain lifestyle — going out and catching up with friends and family. But now, you cannot simply do that. Even your family cannot join you because they need to undergo mandatory quarantine. So, the bubble life is difficult for sure, but there is not much that you can do about it."

The bio-bubble is the new normal for these cricketers and commentators, and they don't complain. As they say, it is part of the job. ✉

Unique experience: Former India spinner Kartik Murali is a "veteran" of bio-bubbles. "We all dreaded it in the beginning, but it is a part of life now. As professionals, we need to accept the tough part of the job and this bio-bubble is extremely challenging. You have to learn to live by yourself. It can get lonely no doubt, but you have to find ways to stay focused," he says.

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ONE STEP AT A TIME

On yet another comeback when she competes in the Doha and Dubai Opens, Sania Mirza says she is really excited and it feels like the first comeback of the career.

V. V. SUBRAHMANYAM

At 34, six-time Grand Slam champion Sania Mirza is chasing yet another dream — of winning an Olympic medal.

"Well, the Olympics has been at the back of my mind. I am back to full-length training now, practising for more than four hours daily," Sania said in an exclusive chat with *Sportstar* after another long grind at the Sania Mirza Tennis Academy in Hyderabad.

"I will try just to stay healthy, keep myself fit for the challenge of taking part in the [Tokyo] Olympics, which will be my fourth. Definitely, an Olympics medal is one thing which I feel I am missing in my list of achievements. And I want to shut this chapter of my life with a medal in Tokyo," Sania said. "I do believe that I have a couple of more years of tennis left in me."

"I just want to put myself in a position to be in with a chance. I love to stay positive and am conscious of the kind of challenges one has to face to win an Olympic medal too," Sania said with a big smile.

"Honestly, I have been very lucky, by the grace of god, both in real life and on the tennis court. Importantly, I always have the support system that one needs to be a top-class athlete," Sania said.

Getting ready: The six-time Grand Slam winner trains at her Sania Mirza Tennis Academy in Hyderabad.

V. V. SUBRAHMANYAM

BLK
WTA
WTA
HOBART

Successful return: With Nadiia Kichenok, Sania won the 2020 Hobart International doubles title on her comeback after the birth of her son. GETTY IMAGES

"Definitely, I am keen to take it step by step. It will be a different kind of challenge to be back in the circuit after such a long gap because of the pandemic. The bio-bubble is going to be another major issue," the champion tennis player said after a long training session with Davis Cupper Saketh Myneni and others.

"There is nothing like setting a major goal as I look ahead. I would love to take it event by event, take one step at a time," she said. "The biggest challenge during the pandemic is to stay healthy. Even I have recovered from COVID-19. That way, it took a little bit longer for me to start full length training," Sania revealed.

"The sport took a back seat because of the pandemic, for sure. It also taught us how to lead a healthy life and understand the simple things in life and remind us that health is more important than anything else in the world," she explained.

"I enjoyed spending quality time especially with the family. I loved being with my son Izhaan, which otherwise I would have struggled to do," she said.

On yet another comeback when she competes in the Doha and Dubai Opens, Sania says she is really excited and it feels like the first comeback of the career.

"I am looking forward to being back and competing again. Let us see how it goes. Last year around this time on my comeback (after being blessed with her son), I had won a WTA event in Australia before another injury," she said.

"Hopefully, I can do it again and win some major events. I will see how things shape up in the days to come," Sania concluded.

FROM THE VANTAGE POINT

PAUL FEIN

The Djoker stops the Next Gen again

Despite a painful torn abdominal muscle suffered during a third-round match, the world No. 1 backed up his confident words in Melbourne. Young guns, veteran standouts and a shock semifinalist all fell prey to the current best of the Big Three.

Novak Djokovic often says how much he admires legends Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal and how much they inspire him to smash their record of 20 major titles. Djokovic has quite another message for young Next Gen contenders trying to dethrone him.

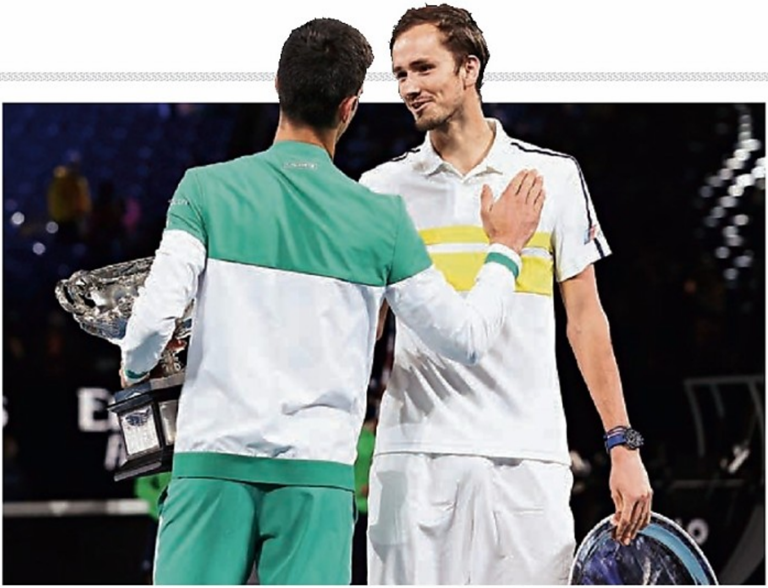
Before his ninth Australian Open final, the outspoken Serb warned, “There has been a lot of talk about the new generation and taking over the three of us, but realistically that isn’t happening still. We can talk about it all day if you want. But with all my respect about the other guys, they still have a lot of work to do.”

Inching closer: Novak Djokovic's ninth Australian Open triumph put him within two of the all-time record of 20 Grand Slam singles titles held jointly by Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer. GETTY IMAGES

Despite a painful torn abdominal muscle suffered during a third-round match, Djokovic backed up his confident words in Melbourne. Young guns, veteran standouts and a shock semifinalist all fell prey to the current best of the Big Three.

Against Djokovic, red-hot Daniil Medvedev brought a 20-match winning streak, including 12 over top-10 foes, in quest of his first Grand Slam title. The towering Russian had also whipped the Serb in three of their last four matches.

But just an hour and 53 minutes after



Djokovic belted an ace on the first point, he conjured a leaping skyhook overhead to finish off the outclassed Medvedev 7-5, 6-2, 6-2. So much for the latest Next Gen contender. Djokovic's 18th major title gave the Big Three an astounding 57 of the last 69 majors.

Medvedev thinks the trio are superhuman. "To win nine Australian Opens, I need to win every year until I'm 34," he said. "I mean, I believe in myself, but I don't think I'm able to do it. Same with Rafa. I mean, 13 Roland Garros... We're talking about some cyborgs of tennis in a good way. They're just unbelievable."

Djokovic looked mortal rather than bionic, though, when he lunged and fell while comfortably leading Taylor Fritz 7-6, 6-4, 2-1. During a medical timeout, he took the maximum dose of an anti-inflammatory medicine to relieve the "huge pain" in his abdomen. The injury, which hampered Djokovic's movement and serve, enabled the 22-year-old American to grab the next two sets.

The resilient Serb seemed revitalised in the deciding set. Leading 5-2 on Fritz's serve, Djokovic ripped a forehand winner to stave off a game point and forced two Fritz errors to prevail 7-6, 6-4, 3-6, 4-6, 6-2. Then he screamed in joy and relief. Afterwards, Djokovic said, "I don't know how I won this match." But *ESPN* analyst Brad Gilbert did, saying, "This is a champion refusing to lose."

Respect: Daniil Medvedev praised Djokovic for helping him when he was an aspiring teenager and the Serb was No. 1. "Because I was shy, I didn't speak. He was asking the questions, talking to me like a friend. I was really surprised. It never changed since I was 600 in the world or four in the world. You're a great sport, great person."
GETTY IMAGES

The other, much-tougher half of the draw featured No. 2-seeded Nadal, going for a record-breaking 21st major title, and rising stars No. 4 Medvedev, No. 5 Stefanos Tsitsipas, No. 7 Andrey Rublev and No. 9 Matteo Berrettini. To win their first Grand Slam crown, one of these contenders would likely have to take down Nadal and then probably Djokovic — both daunting challenges.

Despite an ailing back, Nadal romped to the quarterfinals without dropping a set. Most impressive was Rafa's 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 victory over No. 16 Fabio Fognini, the talented Italian who had beaten Nadal four times previously.

Meanwhile, Tsitsipas survived a 6-7, 6-4, 6-1, 6-7, 6-4 second-round battle against

Unbelievable collapse: Stefanos Tsitsipas (right) pounded away at Rafael Nadal's backhand until it finally broke down. His younger legs eventually wore Nadal down to produce a stunning 3-6, 2-6, 7-6, 6-4, 7-5 triumph in the quarterfinals.
GETTY IMAGES

resurgent Australian Thanasi Kokkinakis, whose career had been derailed by injuries. Tsitsipas caught a break when Berrettini withdrew from their fourth-round match due to an abdominal strain he suffered during his 7-6, 7-6, 7-6 win over No. 19 Karen Khachanov. The rash of injuries may have resulted from a lack of physical training during the quarantine.

In an intriguing quarterfinal filled with sharp contrasts, Nadal faced Tsitsipas. It pitted the lefty against the righty. The bruising baseliner against the athletic net-rusher. The two-handed backhand against the one-hander. And above all, the Legend against the Next Genner. Nadal's only title here came way back in 2009. Tsitsipas exploded on the pro scene at the 2019 Aussie Open with a four-set upset over Federer.

Shocking turnabout

After Nadal comfortably took the first two sets 6-3, 6-2, "The Greek Freak" rebounded to force a tiebreaker. Then, in the shocker of all shockers, Nadal, who possesses one of the best overheads in tennis history, blew two routine smashes — and also made two unforced ground-stroke errors. The unbelievable collapse gave Tsitsipas the tiebreaker 7-4. It also gave the underdog hope.

Seizing the opportunity, the 22-year-old Tsitsipas pounded away at Nadal's backhand until it finally broke down. His younger legs eventually wore Nadal down to produce a stunning 3-6, 2-6, 7-6, 6-4, 7-5 triumph. "He out-physicalled Rafa," said all-time great Martina Navratilova. "And I don't think I've ever seen that. This is a breakthrough win, a career-defining moment for Tsitsipas." The comeback was all the more astonishing because the fiercely competitive Nadal had boasted a 235-1 record after holding a two-set lead at a major.

Afterwards, the ecstatic Tsitsipas told the spectators, "I started very nervous, I won't lie, but I don't know what happened after the third set. I just flied like a little bird, everything was working for me. The emotions at the end are indescribable."

Secret weapon

Someone most tennis fans never heard of before the fortnight exemplified both traits. During the ATP Cup won by Russia in January, Medvedev called him "their secret weapon."

The secret was out of the bag at the Australian Open where Aslan Karatsev, a

Surprise package: The rugged 6'1", 187-pound Aslan Karatsev, with his Popeye-like muscular calves, rampaged through the draw. He trounced No. 7 Diego Schwartzman, overcame No. 20 Felix Auger-Aliassime, and stopped No. 18 Grigor Dmitrov. But Djokovic had too much game, athleticism and experience for Karatsev and polished him off 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 in the semifinals. GETTY IMAGES

qualifier ranked No. 114, zoomed all the way to the semifinals. After nine failed tries to make the main draw at a major, he made history as the first man in the Open Era to reach the semifinals in his Grand Slam debut.

Born in Vladikavkaz, Russia, the 27-year-old Karatsev has never wavered during his long, hard, winding road toward the top. His family emigrated to Israel when was three and he practised there until age 12, when he returned to Taganrog, Russia, with his father. Karatsev trained there until he was 18, when he moved to Moscow, the hotbed of Russian tennis. His next career destinations were Halle, Germany, and Barcelona, Spain, and for the past three years, Minsk, Belarus. There Karatsev hooked up with his old friend Yahor Yatsyk, a 28-year-old Belarusian coach, and his hard-hitting game finally started to click.

The rugged 6'1", 187-pound Karatsev,

with his Popeye-like muscular calves, rampaged through the draw. He trounced No. 7 Diego Schwartzman, a diminutive clay-court standout, 6-3, 6-3, 6-3; overcame No. 20 Felix Auger-Aliassime 3-6, 1-6, 6-3, 6-3, 6-4; and in the quarterfinals, he stopped No. 18 Grigor Dmitrov, who was hampered by a painful back spasm, 2-6, 6-4, 6-1, 6-2. In his quarterfinal press conference, Karatsev was amusingly asked, "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

To secure his semifinal berth, Djokovic had to beat two more rocket servers. For the 12th straight time, he defused Milos Raonic, 7-6, 4-6, 6-1, 6-4. Alexander Zverev, the 2020 US Open runner-up, posed a greater threat because of his improved versatility. Djokovic led the German two sets to one when they arrived at a tiebreaker. Each player won their serving points up to 6-all. Then Zverev rushed the net and Djokovic cleverly countered with a low passing shot that the lunging, 6'6" Zverev volleyed deep. No one plays big points better than Djokovic, and he aced the German for a 6-7, 6-2, 6-4, 7-6 victory.

Fourth Grand Slam title: Naomi Osaka's 21st consecutive match victory dispelled any lingering notion of parity in the post-Serena Williams era. As former champion Justine Henin told *Eurosport*: "Women's tennis has a new boss. Naomi Osaka has this capacity, she has taken another dimension."
GETTY IMAGES

Both semifinals were fast and decisive. Medvedev, who had ended the eight-match unbeaten streak of good friend Andrey Rublev 7-5, 6-3, 6-2 in the previous round, scored a surprisingly easy 6-4, 6-2, 7-5 win over Tsitsipas. The Greek looked tired after his gruelling match against Nadal, and the Russian, sensing that, punished him with long, energy-sapping rallies. Not even the loud cheers from the partisan Greek-Australians could pump him up.

As expected, Djokovic had too much game, athleticism and experience for Karatsev and polished him off 6-3, 6-4, 6-2. "The difference [between Djokovic and other opponents] is really big," said Karatsev. "He doesn't give you free points. On my service game, there's always rallies and rallies. He served well during all of the match, so you're under pressure."

After nine matches, Karatsev's Cinderella story finally ended. But he showed the power of persistence during a journey from the foothills of the Caucasus mountains to Melbourne. The one-time tennis nonentity became a somebody, a world-class player with a very respectable No. 42 ranking.

Master-class final

Aside from the close first set, the final was more master class than competition. After breaking serve in the second game, Djokovic played his worst game of the match, making four unforced errors, the last on a bounce overhead into the net, to cut his lead to 3-2. As Patrick McEnroe later said, "As great as he is, it's amazing how poor his overhead is."

The Serb, whose first serve averaged 120 mph during the final, held serve easily to lead 6-5. A forehand winner and a beautiful backhand passing shot highlighted his service break to grab the first set, 7-5. When Djokovic broke back to even the second set at 1-all, his partisans chanted "Ole, ole, ole," a version of his nickname, "Nole."

From that point on, Djokovic dominated every phase of the game. Medvedev's chess-like tactical brilliance, touted in previous matches, was trumped by Djokovic's technical superiority. Former US Open champion Andy Roddick's absurd claim that "technique is overrated" was powerfully refuted.

Djokovic's textbook ground strokes were simply sounder, stronger, deeper and more consistent than Medvedev's. Add in Djoker's world-best serve return and his improved serve, and Medvedev faced both an irresistible force and an immovable object. His flawless volley produced the most dazzling stat: he won 16 of 18 points (89 percent) at the net. That all-court versatility kept Medvedev in untenable positions and on the run, and often made him hit off balance and on his back foot.

When Djokovic won a long rally to hold serve for 5-2 in the third set, he pointed to his head. Did it mean that he, known for studying videos of his opponents, had outwitted an opponent known for his cleverness? Or did it refer to his mental toughness by prevailing in what he called a "roller-coaster" tournament? Perhaps both.

Either way, Djokovic's record-extending ninth Australian title had to be his most satisfying, a kind of redemption after his ignominious default at the US Open and his demolition by Nadal in the French final last fall.

Although Djokovic can't match Federer and Nadal in fan popularity, other players often remark about his kindness. During the trophy ceremony, Medvedev praised him for helping him when he was an aspiring teenager and Djokovic was No. 1. "Because I was shy, I didn't speak," Medevedev recalled. "He was asking the questions, talking to me like a friend. I was really surprised. It never changed since I was 600 in the world or four in the world. You're a great sport, great person. So congratulations."

Queen Naomi reigns down under

As trophy ceremony speeches go for tennis woman of the world Naomi Osaka, this wasn't the most memorable, though it had the funniest moment. Before Osaka paid a gracious tribute to runner-up Jennifer Brady, she asked, "Do you like to be called Jenny or Jennifer?" Brady replied, "Jenny." Then Osaka said, "Firstly, I want to congratulate Jennifer."

The gaffe was one of the few missteps Queen Naomi made during the Australian Open. Navigating a brutal draw, Osaka captured her second Aussie title and her fourth Grand Slam title in her first four major finals. Only Roger Federer with seven straight and Monica Seles with six straight have pulled off such Grand Slam domination so early in their superstar careers.

Osaka's 21st consecutive match victory also dispelled any lingering notion of parity in the post-Serena Williams era. Before the fortnight Down Under, nine of the last 14 majors were won by first-timers. Osaka made sure that wouldn't happen again when she convincingly stopped debutante finalist Brady 6-4, 6-3. As former champion Justine Henin told *Eurosport*: "Women's tennis has a new boss. Naomi Osaka has this capacity, she has taken another dimension."

> “
> I feel like the biggest thing that I want to achieve is — this is going to sound really odd — but hopefully I play long enough to play a girl that said that I was once her favourite player or something. For me, I think that's the coolest thing that could ever happen to me. I think I have those feelings of watching my favourite players. Unfortunately, I didn't get to play Li Na, but, yeah, I just think that that's how the sport moves forward."
>
> — Naomi Osaka

And for the historical record, the 23-year-old Japanese thwarted 39-year-old Serena's fading bid to equal Margaret Court's hallowed mark of 24 Grand Slam titles with a 6-3, 6-4 semifinal triumph.

Even the Great Ones sometimes have to escape from the brink of defeat to capture a Grand Slam title. In the fourth round, Osaka faced a challenger who matched her prodigious ground-stroke power. Osaka had never played two-time major champion Garbine Muguruza, and afterwards admitted, "I feel like I was a bit intimidated."

The 26-year-old Spaniard certainly wasn't intimidated as she raced to a 6-4, 1-0 lead, breaking Osaka with a perfect topspin lob winner. Osaka, who has captured all her majors on hard courts, quickly regrouped by hitting timely winners and reducing unforced errors to seize the second set 6-4.

In the deciding set, 2020 Australian finalist Muguruza belted a backhand winner to surge ahead 5-3. When Osaka, the pre-tournament co-favourite at 9-2 with Ashleigh Barty, fell behind 15-40, double match point, on her serve, she looked finished. But, as champions so often do, she exploded with a barrage of lethal shots. Her 10th ace and a potent forehand erased both match points. Then, a forehand winner and another ace narrowed Muguruza's lead to 5-4. "Osaka is eerily calm on the big points," noted *ESPN* analyst Chris Evert, a former champion nicknamed "Ice Princess" for her own coolness under pressure.

With the 6' Spaniard serving for the match, Osaka unleashed a backhand winner and a forehand winner to break her serve for 5-all. Riding the momentum out of troubled waters, Osaka took eight of the last 10 points for a 4-6, 6-4, 7-5 victory.

Motivated and dangerous

Osaka would need brains as much as brawn against heavyweight Serena. Although Serena, the consensus GOAT, hadn't won a major since the 2017 Australian Open when she was eight weeks pregnant, she had reached four major finals and remained highly motivated and dangerous. She whipped No. 7 Aryna Sabalenka 6-4, 2-6, 6-4 and two-time

Fluctuating battle: Serving for a place in the final, Jennifer Brady escaped three break points, each time fist-pumping. Just as remarkably, the valiant Karolina Muchova (ffacing page) ought off four match points, the last coming on a swinging forehand volley winner. But Brady held her nerve to win the last two points and capture the 16-point game. GETTY IMAGES

major champ Simona Halep 6-3, 6-3, and so, Serena brought plenty of momentum and confidence to the match against Osaka.

But would her ageing body and suspect nerves hold up, given her tough draw? And what about her ground-stroke technique that occasionally has broken down in recent years? Shriver summed up the intergenerational rivalry best when she said, "Osaka does everything Serena does, but a little bit better."

Serena boasted a perfect 8-0 record in Australian Open semifinals going into this blockbuster match against her successor to the throne, while Osaka was a perfect 3-0 in Grand Slam semifinals.

Nerves betrayed Osaka, as she gave away the opening game with a double fault and three unforced ground-stroke errors. Serena then easily held serve for a 2-0 lead.

Rarely has the turning point in a match come this early. But with Osaka down 2-0 and break point down at 30-40, Serena surprisingly buckled under the pressure, making an unforced forehand error and missing a forehand serve return. That slight opening was all the opportunistic Osaka needed. She blasted an ace to hold serve and then, loosening up, broke Serena's serve with brilliant angles to even the score at 2-2.

What if Serena had capitalised on her early chance for a double break? In any event, two games later Osaka notched another service break with a backhand down-the-line winner and a forehand winner to pull ahead 4-2. That was all she needed to take the opening set 6-3, despite getting a shockingly low 36 percent of first serves in. Another shocking stat: Serena hit only one ground-stroke winner. No wonder the normally vocal American didn't scream until she held serve for 5-3.

Superb frontrunner

A superb frontrunner with a 43-1 record in majors after winning the first set, Osaka started the second set on fire. A backhand crosscourt winner broke Serena for 1-0. Then two aces, the first 120 mph, made it 2-0. "Serena's facing a player who seems to beat her at her own game," said Evert.

When Serena roared, as only she can, after a forehand winner in the fifth game, many of the 7,500 spectators roared in support. (Only half of the Rod Laver Arena capacity was allowed due to Covid-19 protocols.) Concerned that she might lose focus playing her hero, Osaka avoided eye contact with Serena and kept her distance as they walked to their seats during changeovers.

It took three double faults by the suddenly nervous Osaka for Serena to break back for 4-all. Just as suddenly, the 5'11" Osaka regained her poise. Reeling off the last eight points, highlighted by four winners, she closed it out for a solid, if uneven, 6-3, 6-4 victory.

As Serena walked off the court, the

seven-time Australian Open winner waved to the crowd. Was it a goodbye wave, signally her final appearance Down Under? Pressed on the point during her post-match media conference, a tearful Serena said, "I don't know, if I'll ever say farewell, I wouldn't tell anyone. I don't know. I'm done." Then the proud champion abruptly exited.

Overshadowed by the former queen and the new queen, Jennifer Brady won the most positive player attitude award as the state of Victoria imposed strict rules to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Because she travelled to Melbourne on a flight with cases of Covid-19, she was one of the 51 singles entrants, including 12 seeded players, forced into complete isolation for two weeks. All the other players were allowed to practise outdoors for a maximum of two hours a day. "A lot of people were complaining and I told myself I wasn't going to complain," Brady said. "There's way worse things going on in the world than me being stuck in a hotel room for 14 days..."

Handling the hard lockdown better than anyone, Brady would prove her semifinal showing at the 2020 US Open was no fluke. There her three-set slugfest with Osaka was the consensus top match of the pandemic-shortened season. In Melbourne, Brady easily defeated every opponent before dropping a set in the quarterfinals to good friend Jessica Pegula, who had earlier upset No. 5 Elina Svitolina.

Brady faced much-improved Karolína Muchova in the semifinals. Athletic and versatile, the 25th seed from the Czech Republic demonstrated why all-time great Martina Navratilova tabbed her last year as a future top-tenner. Muchova staged three comebacks to upset No. 6 Karolina Pliskova 7-5, 7-5, No. 18 Elise Mertens 7-6, 7-5, and No. 1 and home country favourite Barty 1-6, 6-3, 6-2.

In an exciting, fluctuating match where neither Brady nor Muchova performed their best at the same time, they split sets. The calibre of play picked up in the intense deciding set as both battled ferociously to reach their first major final. Their dazzling shotmaking reached a crescendo with Brady serving at 5-4 to close out the match.

Brady escaped three break points, each time fist-pumping. Just as remarkably, the valiant Muchova fought off four match points, the last coming on a swinging forehand volley winner. But Brady held her nerve to win the last two points and capture the 16-point game, the toughest in her career, for an enthralling 6-4, 3-6, 6-4 victory. "I was just so nervous," Brady said afterwards. "Couldn't feel my legs. My arms were shaking. I was just hoping she would miss."

No stone unturned

Brady would face the toughest match of her career as a decided underdog in the final. Osaka and her team, led by coach Wim Fissette, had left no stone unturned. Reflecting on Victoria Azarenka's superb return of serve in their close US Open final last

Tearful exit: As Serena Williams walked off the court after her semifinal loss to Osaka, the seven-time Australian Open winner waved to the crowd. Was it a goodbye wave, signally her final appearance Down Under? GETTY IMAGES

September, Osaka, said, "I just wanted to have a return like her, to be honest, because I felt like if I have a good serve and a good return, then it will kind of increase my chances a lot."

Those two first-strike weapons certainly proved decisive in her previous six matches. Osaka lost her serve only eight times. Equally telling, her serve returns against Serena helped her convert 4 of 4 break points and win an excellent 44 percent of her receiving points, double that of Serena.

Even more ominous for Brady was this statement, almost a credo, by Osaka. "For me, I have this mentality that people don't remember the runners-up," she said before the final. "You might, but the winner's name is the one that's engraved [on the trophy]. I think I fight the hardest in the finals. I think that's where you sort of set yourself apart."

Many experts predict Osaka will set herself apart and wind up with double-digit major titles before she hangs up her sneakers. "She wants to break records," said Evert. "She's been very vocal about that."

This final lacked the scintillating shots and sustained suspense of their US Open semifinal, but still produced some excitement. Both players boast potent first serves — Osaka averaged 111 mph and Brady 109 — and fearsome forehands with somewhat inconsistent backhands. So it became a battle of wits and skill to attack the other player's weakness. Incredibly, Osaka keeps a mental count of her winners in her head during a match, like a card counter in Las Vegas. Going into the final, she amassed 37 winners and 48 unforced errors on her vulnerable backhand.

With lots of Japanese flags fluttering in the cool, breezy evening, the slightly pro-Osaka crowd witnessed both players trading service breaks in the middle of the first set. Osaka staved off a break point to lead 5-4, and a tiebreaker looked likely when Brady led 40-15 in the next game. But the less-experienced American played poorly to lose the next four points and the set 6-4.

Yelling "Come on!" after every ace, Osaka raced to a 4-love lead in the second set. With fans cheering her on to make it a closer match, Brady obliged by breaking serve to tighten the match a bit at 4-1.

But, as *ESPN* analyst Brad Gilbert said, "She has an assassin's mentality." Sure enough, serving for the championship at 5-3, Osaka finished off her victim in four straight points.

The only question about Osaka centres around whether she's ready to win a Grand Slam title on grass and clay, the more specialised surfaces. She's never advanced past the third round at either Wimbledon or Roland Garros. It won't surprise anyone if Queen Naomi wins another major this year, and the more suitable venue for her dynamic and evolving game would seemingly be the fast grass at Wimbledon, the citadel of tennis.

Wherever she triumphs and however successful her career may become, Osaka aspires for a different legacy. "I feel like the biggest thing that I want to achieve is — this is going to sound really odd — but hopefully I play long enough to play a girl that said that I was once her favourite player or something," she said. "For me, I think that's the coolest thing that could ever happen to me. I think I have those feelings of watching my favourite players. Unfortunately, I didn't get to play Li Na, but, yeah, I just think that that's how the sport moves forward."

For those watching on television, the Australian Open 2021 was a unique experience. The sight of fans coming through the turnstiles, eating and drinking on site and enjoying some high-quality action in person were welcome changes compared to the now common empty stadia and supporter-less tournaments. For the players, too, it was a different setting, but not without big challenges. India's best-ranked men's doubles player Rohan Bopanna and best-ranked women's singles and doubles player Ankita Raina share their experiences from Down Under.

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Bubble life but not a bubble life

Rohan Bopanna

It was very different to begin with. I was among those unlucky ones to have got caught in the hard quarantine after someone in my flight into Australia tested positive. That was difficult, because I had a good off season and had done a lot of work. To suddenly go into a hard lockdown, not practise and train at all, it was tough, both physically and mentally. To be inside your room 24x7 for 15 days... There was hardly even any air to breathe. There was nothing to look forward to. I could do my fitness five times a day. If I didn't want to sleep, I need not. As an athlete, you are so used to planning, this completely throws you off. You end up losing a lot of muscles. When you get back, you have to go straight into 100 percent intensity instead of gradually building up. Not easy at all.

Of course, after the quarantine, to go out, have some people come over and watch was really nice. Bubble life, having no fans and travelling week in and week out is no fun. Of course, it is our job and we have to maintain our rankings. That kind of forces you to play. If not for that, nobody would go out to play. So, having fans definitely made a big difference, especially with the energy they brought. With regards to going around the city, if you see, India is pretty much like that now. It is slightly different in Australia. You could go out within a 5km radius from where you are staying, get a meal and come back. But while the tournament was on, there was another lockdown. So, it was like a bubble life but not a bubble life. Still, what the Australian Open pulled off was incredible, especially for a country with a hard quarantine rule. It was all so well set up.

GETTY IMAGES

Airport, venue and hotel!

Ankita Raina

Being in the bio-bubble was tough because you couldn't step out even if the situation in the city was not bad! It's always refreshing to step out for dinner or just have a walk around so that you can relax your mind. But that option isn't available in these present times. So, we need to find other ways to unwind. Usually, if a player loses, at least then you get the time and chance to go out and see the city. But in a bubble, that's not possible because of the restrictions. If you step out, it's only towards the airport, apart from the venue and hotel!

So, we were in Melbourne for more than a month. First, we had 14 days' quarantine, where we got five hours to train and we were escorted in and out of the venue. I enjoyed my hits during quarantine with my cohort partner Francesca Jones. She was fun and quite chilled, so it was easy to plan our sessions. Also, having one of my coaches from my academy, Utsav Mukherjee, really helped and I'm thankful to him. Then, we were free to go out but didn't get a chance really as I was a lucky loser for singles and had to be at the venue. Then, once I got into the doubles, I was preparing for that and didn't even think about anything else! Post that, I got a day where I decided to practise for the Philip Island Trophy that began the very next day. In that week, I played finals and the next day after finals, that is, on a Saturday, I flew to Adelaide. They had a bubble there, too. So, I practised on Saturday, played my first match on Sunday, and then finally when I had my first day off since I left home on January 4, I couldn't step out because of the bubble! So, believe me, it's really tough travelling now.

As told to N. Sudarshan

Budding star: By winning bronze at the prestigious junior Orange Bowl in 2019, Manas further strengthened the belief that he is special and needs to be groomed diligently for the future.
KAMESH SRINIVASAN

Ready to take on the world

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

At 13, the precocious Manas Dhamne has already lost nearly a year of tennis to the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, the boy is striding forward with the opportunities available in the global arena.

Even as he was making waves in the domestic age-group tournaments — winning loads of them — Manas got the acknowledgement he deserved when he won the Eddie Herr under-12 title at the IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, in December 2019. With players from about 90 countries, the tournament was easily the best indicator of future stars — and Manas made the doubles final too to assert his all-round skills and staying ability.

By winning bronze at the prestigious junior Orange Bowl in 2019, Manas further strengthened the belief that he is special and needs to be groomed diligently for the future.

As tennis opened up for the juniors after

Manas Dhamne is just 13, but he is striding forward with the opportunities available in the global arena.

Seeing potential: “Manas is extremely talented. He is very smart and has terrific ball sense. He has a lot of maturity in the way he puts the point together, and in the manner he finds a way to win,” said Namita Bal, who was the coach for the Indian team during the Asian leg of the Les Petits As event in Bali, Indonesia, which won Manas a ticket to France for later this year.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

many months of inaction, Manas qualified for and made it to the quarterfinals and semifinals of the first two international under-18 tournaments in Delhi and Gurugram, losing both times to top seed Nishant Dabas. Later, in Kathmandu, Manas qualified and reached the pre-quarterfinals.

These were Manas’s first three ITF junior tournaments, where he gained the experience of 18 matches in three weeks and took his ranking close to the top 500 in the world.

For his age, Manas has already had many mentors. Luckily, they all have taken him forward in his tennis career.

Manas joined Sandeep Kirtane, one of the best coaches in the country, at his academy in Pune in January 2018, after the boy had worked with Ravindra Pande at the city’s Club Solaris from the age of five. That May, Manas won the national under-12 title.

“Manas has always been a standout talent, not just in his results, but his overall approach towards the game. He is a child prodigy, always winning higher age groups. I had already heard a lot about him when I first saw him at the Deccan Gymkhana in 2017,” said Kirtane.

“Manas is a very steady player with a superb double-fisted backhand. He is very consistent in his shot-making. He has a very sound temperament and that is one of his big assets. He is a superb talent and has to work hard on fitness and staying healthy,” he added.

Hoping to step up his tennis further, Manas moved to Aditya Madkekar and Kaifi Afzal at the Adar Poonawalla Maharashtra Tennis Academy after 10 months of training with Kirtane. But before starting on the ITF juniors, Manas trained with Kirtane for a month to get ready for the tough grind of the under-18 circuit.

A month before he made the world take note, coach Namita Bal made some observations about Manas after seeing him compete in the Asian leg of the premier Les Petits As event, which won him a ticket to France for later this year.

“Manas is extremely talented. He is very smart and has terrific ball sense. He has a lot of maturity in the way he puts the point together, and in the manner he finds a way to win,” said Bal, who was the coach for the Indian team during the event in Bali, Indonesia. “He is very focused and disciplined. He likes to hit the ball early and use

Right guidance: Once IMG noticed Manas's potential in Florida, it promptly took over the responsibility of guiding and shaping his tennis career. It was decided that he would be based in Europe under the tutelage of renowned coach Riccardo Piatti, who has worked with top players such as world No. 1 Novak Djokovic and former top-10 players Ivan Ljubicic, Richard Gasquet and Milos Raonic.

KAMESH SRINIVASAN

the opponent's pace. He makes full use of everything he has got."

Once IMG noticed Manas's potential in Florida, it promptly took over the responsibility of guiding and shaping his tennis career. It was decided that he would be based in Europe under the tutelage of renowned coach Riccardo Piatti, who has worked with top players such as world No. 1 Novak Djokovic and former top-10 players Ivan Ljubicic, Richard Gasquet and Milos Raonic.

Ljubicic — who won a bronze medal in doubles for Croatia with Mario Ancic at the 2004 Athens Olympics, defeating Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi in a 7-6 (5), 4-6, 16-14 marathon — is nowadays better known for his presence in Roger Federer's camp. Ljubicic joined Piatti when he was 20 and was ranked 954 in the world. He eventually reached a career high of No. 3 in singles in his 15-year-old association with the coach.

Piatti worked with Djokovic when he was 18, and they parted ways only because Piatti could not be his full-time coach.

With such a guru, Manas's talent is bound to prosper. The 13-year-old has already had a two-week stint with Piatti and has been getting ready for more in Europe, but getting a visa is not easy for someone of his age because of the global restrictions on travel during the Covid pandemic.

"Riccardo Piatti was very happy watching Manas training at his academy," said Manas's father, Manoj.

Kirtane is also quite impressed with the manner Manas's parents have kept him "grounded" and supported him well. "Manas is a very special talent. He needs to always focus on development. Even though he should not be worried about the results and the junior rankings, he should aim to do well in the junior Grand Slams and even try to win it," he said, adding, "I think Manas can go very far in the international scene."

"Manas has a god-gifted talent. He plays with intensity and a lot of thought. We have been supporting his travel," said Sunder Iyer, the secretary of the Maharashtra Tennis Association.

"The boy likes the game and wants to play. Hopefully, things will work for him," he said, crediting Manas's parents for their vision.

Manas is growing strong physically and mentally, ready to take on the world. That is a good sign for Indian tennis.

Making a difference: Akash Mishra is ranked second for tackles (80) for defenders, is second for interceptions (55) and has effected 48 clearances and 37 blocks.
ISL / SPORTZPICS

Courting a national call-up

On current form, no left-back in India is better than Akash Mishra, who has played every single minute of this season.

AASHIN PRASAD

It was after Hyderabad FC's first game of the 2020-21 Indian Super League (ISL) season when the team won 1-0 that head coach Manolo Marquez said league debutant Akash Mishra would go on to become the best left-back in India.

"We spoke with him about his first game in the ISL. He is very quiet, has a very good mentality. For me, he will be one of the best left-backs in India soon," said Marquez.

It was big praise for the then 18-year-old, who was a relative unknown. But over the course of the season, Mishra has justified his coach's words.

On current form, no player in the position is better than Mishra, who has played every single minute of this season.

The Uttar Pradesh-born footballer is ranked second for tackles (80) for defenders, is second for interceptions (55) and has effected 48 clearances and 37 blocks.

Mishra is technically sound on the ball, has excellent positional sense and has the ability to dribble — which make him tick all the right boxes for a modern-day full-back.

His reading of the game was highlighted in the 1-1 draw against Odisha FC when he made multiple goal-line clearances to save the game for his side.

One of the lasting images from a Hyderabad game was the galloping runs made by the gangly footballer from his own box into the final third or having his run halted by an opposition player hacking him down.

The league's best attackers have tried to take him on, down the flanks, but Mishra has often come out top in one-on-one duels.

Despite the disappointment of missing out on the ISL playoffs, a maiden national team call-up from for the upcoming friendlies against Oman and the United Arab Emirates could be around the corner for Mishra.

Marquez reiterated his stance on Mishra in January when he said, "Akash will be the left-back in the national team. I don't know when. He listens to his coaches. He has to improve. But I wish he becomes India's left-back."

The challenge will now be for the youngster to repeat the performances and continue to elevate his game to the next level. ✪

Leading the pack: Currently leading the race for the Golden Boot with 14 goals and four assists, Krishna will be more than eager to make it to a second successive final and clinch a second successive title. ISL / SPORTZPICS

Back at his best

SHYAM VASUDEVAN

The stocky ponytailed striker from the Fijian islands has taken the Indian Super League (ISL) by storm – for the second season running. If Roy Krishna was brilliant last season when he scored a joint league high of 15 goals to lead ATK to the title, he has turned it up a few levels this time around.

A never-tiring pair of feet, a never-say-die attitude and an insatiable appetite for goals saw Krishna top the goal-scoring charts at the end of the league stage of the 2020-21 season. He began the season in sublime fashion by scoring in five of ATK Mohun Bagan's opening six games, but then slipped to a slump of sorts. He managed only one goal in ATK Mohun Bagan's next seven games, and the team also mirrored his form: dropping points in four of those games.

Injuries to key players and morale-draining defeats to Mumbai City and North-East United saw Mumbai City open up a six-point lead at the top and enhance its chances of securing the coveted AFC Champions League berth.

But Antonio Habas, the most successful coach in the ISL with two titles, was not going to watch his side lose out. A change from his conservative "1-0" tactics to a more free-flowing attacking style saw the likes of Krishna revel. With Manvir coming good and the arrival of Marcelinho in the January transfer window, Krishna was back at his best as he pummelled seven goals in the next six games to take ATK Mohun Bagan to the top of the table. His exploits ensured the Mariners took the race for the top spot right down to the wire.

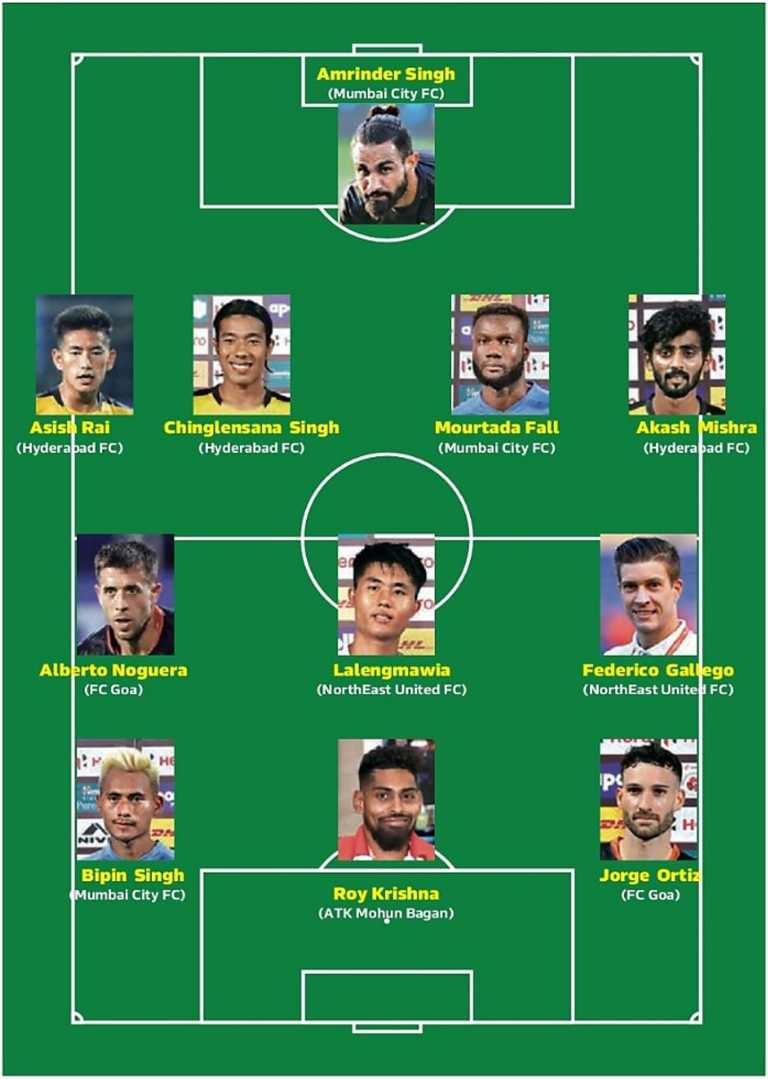
While ATK Mohun Bagan did surrender the League Winners Shield to Mumbai City by losing 2-0 in the decider, Habas's men will have a shot at silverware as they take on NorthEast United FC in the semifinals. And they will have to thank Krishna for coming this far.

The skipper has rescued his side from the jaws of defeat with four match-winning goals after the 75th minute.

Why Krishna stands out is because he brings more to the table than just his phenomenal ability to score goals. The defence starts with him as he begins the press: running non-stop and chasing the ball down to the very end. More often than not you will see him run the entirety of the 90 minutes and sink to his knees at the full-time whistle, giving you a split-second glimpse of just how much work he puts in. His ability to marshal his side along with a remarkable work rate make him one of Habas's most prized assets.

Currently leading the race for the Golden Boot with 14 goals and four assists, Krishna will be more than eager to make it to a second successive final and clinch a second successive title. ⌘

A never-tiring pair of feet, a never-say-die attitude and an insatiable appetite for goals saw ATK Mohun Bagan's Roy Krishna top the goal-scoring charts at the end of the league stage of the 2020-21 season.


Amrinder Singh
(Mumbai City FC)
Asish Rai
(Hyderabad FC)
Chinglensana Singh
(Hyderabad FC)
Mourtada Fall
(Mumbai City FC)
Akash Mishra
(Hyderabad FC)
Alberto Noguera
(FC Goa)
Lalengmawia
(NorthEast United FC)
Federico Gallego
(NorthEast United FC)
Bipin Singh
(Mumbai City FC)
Roy Krishna
(ATK Mohun Bagan)
Jorge Ortiz
(FC Goa)

Mumbai City, Hyderabad dominate

AASHIN PRASAD

At the end of 110 league matches, *Sportstar* narrows down the 11 best players from the 2020-21 ISL season.

The 2020-21 Indian Super League (ISL) season has seen several young Indian players raise their level with consistent performances across four months and 100 league games. From the team we picked from the 2019-20 season, only two players – Mourtada Fall and Roy Krishna – have made the cut for the ongoing campaign.

Newly crowned league winner Mumbai City FC has three representatives, and the much-improved Hyderabad FC has provided three Indian performers to the XI. Goalkeeper Amrinder Singh had his best ISL campaign yet with nine clean sheets to his name and pulled off key saves this season to shut the opposition teams out. After conceding just five goals in the first 13 matches, Amrinder and Mumbai conceded 12 goals in five outings that seemed to derail the Islanders' bid for the title. But Amrinder managed two big clean sheets against ATK Mohun Bagan, which in the end were crucial to Mumbai finishing top of the table.

Amrinder's teammate and centre-back Mourtada Fall has been a reliable rock in defence who has paved the way for Mumbai's success this season. Fall has been the leader at the back and has also chipped in with key goals (three) with his aerial presence, with the Senegalese opening the scoring in the all-important win over ATK Mohun Bagan in the final league game. Hyderabad FC's Chinglensana Singh has been the best Indian centre-back this season and has been a revelation at the back. After having struggled to break through at FC Goa in his three seasons there, Singh has been entrusted with a regular starting berth by head coach Manolo Marquez. The 24-year-old has recorded the most number of passes for an Indian centre-back and has committed just nine fouls in 18 appearances. Hyderabad's Akash Mishra (19-years-old) and Asish Rai (22) have thrilled the league with their energetic displays as attacking fullbacks. The duo has the most number of passes for full-backs and features in the top five for interceptions made in the division. Akash has been the standout candidate for the best Indian defender this season as he has the pace to recover, and he doesn't get bested in one-on-one duels on the flanks.

It's hard to imagine that Lalengmawia – also known as Apuia — is all of 20. After breaking into the first-team setup in a struggling NorthEast United (NEUFC) team last season, Apuia has been a quiet leader in the middle of the park in the team's turnaround to make the playoffs. He is ranked seventh in interceptions (42), is the second-best Indian midfielder for passes (715) and is ranked 10th in tackles (90) effected.

Goa's Alberto Noguera and NEUFC's Federico Gallego have been regular features in our Team of the Fortnight, and it's hard to look past them for this season's honours as the most creative midfielders in the division. It's difficult to get the ball off the feet of these players and they are central to their teams' attacking forays in the final third. When injured, Gallego's absence was largely felt under former head coach Gerard Nus, and it was interim head coach Khalid Jamil who profited from having a fit-and-firing Uruguayan. Gallego finished with four goals and six assists in 14 matches, while Noguera finished as the league's top assist provider with eight.

Mumbai's Bipin Singh has the joint-most goal-scoring contributions (nine) for an Indian this season alongside Sunil Chhetri. He recently became the first player to score a hat-trick in the 2020-21 season to provide Mumbai with the momentum going into the final league game. The 25-year-old has been crucial in providing threatening crosses into the box, and his nippy pace makes him a nightmare to mark during transitions. Goa's Jorge Ortiz is arguably the best winger in the division and he possesses the dribbling ability and pace to beat defenders at will. Despite not playing a big part in the final two games due to injury, Ortiz has struck six goals and provided an assist. His form will be key in Goa's upcoming semifinals against Mumbai.

ATK Mohun Bagan's Roy Krishna's seven goals and four assists from five matches seemed to have taken his side to the doorstep of the league title and the AFC Champions League spot with two games to go. But the ever-running Krishna was halted in the final outings and the Fiji striker couldn't get his team over the line. Despite the blip, the golden-boot race leader with 14 goals has been the best and the most consistent striker in the league.

Reserve team role helped me a lot

Naushad Moosa talks about the challenges of taking over as interim head coach of Bengaluru FC, how the pressure of the task kept him up for nights and how he saw the season pan out from the touchline.

SHYAM VASUDEVAN

Naushad Moosa went to bed one night as the assistant coach of Bengaluru FC and woke up the next morning as the interim head coach.

Bengaluru, the most successful Indian club in the last decade, was enduring one of its worst slumps in form and slipped to three successive losses — a first since its arrival in the Indian Super League (ISL). Carles Cuadrat, who had led Bengaluru to the ISL title in 2018, was let go of and Moosa was handed the reigns.

It's not like Moosa was a new face in the club — he had been at the helm of the reserve side for almost four years. But then came the transition from handling the future stars of Indian football to coaching the current generation, including the national team skipper Sunil Chhetri.

In a candid chat with *Sportstar* after Bengaluru's 4-2 win over Mumbai City, Moosa talks about the challenges of taking over the main team, how the pressure of the task kept him up for nights and how he saw the season pan out from the touchline.

Taking charge: "Being the head coach for these games has helped me understand what is the level needed for the ISL," says Naushad Moosa.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

How difficult was the transition for you and how did the players react to your appointment as interim head coach?

To tell you the truth, I was a bit nervous in the beginning. (The transition) was not all that easy because I went from coaching a reserve squad where you have all the young boys who are looking up to you, and then you have people like Sunil, Gurpreet (Singh Sandhu) and then foreigners like Dimas (Delgado) and Erik (Paartalu) in the senior team. The players made it easy for me. I met them all personally and they just made me feel comfortable and told me not to worry and that they would give their best no matter what. That was really nice of them and helped me ease into the role.

How did you change your role when you took charge of the senior team?

What's very important when you are coaching senior players is how well you're organising the training sessions, how well you're managing the sessions and how much you control the match situations. They were never under me; I was always an assistant and a friend to them. Because that was my job — to see what is happening in their lives and be more friendly with them. But now, it is a different role and I can't do the same.

When they saw things were going well, that's when they started having confidence in me. They got more confidence in me after the win over Mumbai City FC. It's important when you're dealing with a player... You need to give them that space and the confidence for them to trust you as a coach. That has worked in my favour so far.

> “What's very important when you are coaching senior players is how well you're organising the training sessions, how well you're managing the sessions and how much you control the match situations. They were never under me; I was always an assistant and a friend to them. Because that was my job – to see what is happening in their lives and be more friendly with them. But now, it is a different role and I can't do the same.

Tell us a little about how this season has been for Sunil Chhetri. We've often seen him absolutely spent and frustrated at the full-time whistle.

If you see his last few games, after every match he will just come and say sorry. And you must have seen the work he is putting in now. The only thing is I had to control him because of what was happening... It was not only him, but even the other senior players who have been with us for three to four years have not been in such a situation. Nobody has gone through this situation in the last seven years. So that was really frustrating for them, which you could see in Sunil as well. Given that all the junior players look up to him, we told him that it would be nice if he can be calm and just enjoy and not worry about the points table.

He's ageing as well and so for sure he doesn't want to give up. He's a player who I think can play four more years. The amount of discipline and the hard work he puts in-...you have junior players who get injured, but then you have one Sunil who's never injured. Even if he does pick up an injury, he's always taking care of himself and recovers quickly. That's the amount of discipline and that's why he's the best in the country now.

You've always advocated giving youngsters game time and have worked on that since taking over as interim head coach. But the decision to employ youngsters also attracts criticism as they may lack the experience in clutch situations. How do you tackle that?

You learn only from making mistakes. I believe that you don't learn much from doing good things. If you see Parag (Srivas), most of the season he was playing as a left-back and sometimes as a right-back. Most teams were trying to attack from the left when he played as a left-back, thinking that he is a weak link. But we never stopped trusting him. I kept giving him the opportunity. That is very important. We need to keep trusting them. If you give up on the juniors, then the player is gone. Now, we have a player in Parag who can perform. He was not even in the first twenty earlier, but now he is straight in the first eleven.

The other junior players also have hope now that their time will come. I keep talking to them and tell them how important they are for the team in the future.

Being the head coach for these games has helped me understand what is the level really needed for the ISL. When I was with the reserve team, I was just like, they are very good players, they can perform. But now, when I became the head coach here, I got to know what exactly is needed. This will help me give them the feedback they need and assess what more we can do. Maybe next season, I will call them early and work on the weaknesses.

Do you believe Indians can be head coaches in the ISL?

It's very important that we start somewhere. When I got this opportunity at Bengaluru FC, I was not only representing myself as an Indian coach, but I was representing the whole coaches' fraternity as I'm also associated with the All India Football Coaches Association.

It was also there at the back of my mind that if I or Khalid (Jamil, interim head coach at NorthEast United FC) do well, it will reflect on all other Indian coaches and will give them that confidence. I feel we do have good Indian coaches like Clifford Miranda (FC Goa), Thangboi Singto (Hyderabad FC) and Steven Dias (Odisha FC).

The main thing is how Bengaluru FC gave me that opportunity to be the head coach for the reserve team as well and that helped me a lot. All the Indian coaches who are the assistants to the foreigners should get that opportunity to coach maybe the B team as well. That would help.

ETIHAD AIRWAYS
MAHREZ
26
FODEN
47
11

On top: Manchester City's John Stones (second left), celebrates with teammates after scoring his side's second goal against West Ham United in the English Premier League at the Etihad Stadium. AP

Manchester City marches on

DOMINIC RICHARD

Pep Guardiola's men defeated West Ham United 2-1 in an English Premier League encounter.

PREMIER LEAGUE

At the end of game week 26, Manchester City extended its lead at the top of the 2020-21 Premier League standings to 12. With the recent 2-1 victory over West Ham United, Pep Guardiola's team also stretched its winning streak in all competitions to 20, which is just three shy of Bayern Munich's record run in Europe's top-five leagues. Title chaser Manchester United fell further off track following a goalless draw at fifth-placed Chelsea. Ole Gunnar Solsksjaer-managed Red Devils, who reached the UEFA Europa League round-of-16 with a 4-0 aggregate win over Real Sociedad, have racked up 50 points so far. The club immediately below Man United on the table — Leicester City — had the worst week of all, suffering a 1-3 loss at home to Arsenal after being dumped out of the Europa League by Slavia Prague. On the other hand, West Ham stayed fourth despite its latest defeat. Merseyside clubs Liverpool and Everton occupy the sixth and seventh positions, respectively. However, the latter is just three behind its rival and has a game in hand. Jurgen

Dominant: Robert Lewandowski of FC Bayern Munich scores his side's second goal against FC Koln in the Bundesliga. Bayern thumped Koln 5-1.
GETTY IMAGES

Klopp's men were one among the three English outfits, including Man City and Chelsea, to come out on top in their respective UEFA Champions League round-of-16 first-leg clashes. Meanwhile, North London adversaries Tottenham and Arsenal followed up their progression in the Europa League with convincing victories in the English top-division. The Gunners displaced Leeds United in 10th, two points away from Aston Villa and Spurs, who beat Burnley 4-0. Liverpool winger Mohamed Salah is currently the top-scorer (17 goals) of the competition.

LA LIGA

All Spanish teams, except Real Madrid, faced defeats in their latest Champions League contests. Los Blancos backed up their four-match winning run in the 2020-21 La Liga with a hard-fought 1-0 victory over 10-man Atalanta. But Real stayed third in the Spanish league, six points behind arch-nemesis Atletico Madrid, which has 58 points from 24 games this season. The Atleti, however, slumped to a 0-1 loss at home to Chelsea in the premier European club competition. Barcelona jumped to second with a 2-0 triumph over fourth-placed Sevilla, during which Lionel Messi bagged a goal and an assist. Both sides had lost their respective Champion League outings, to PSG and Dortmund. Barca has played a match more than the other outfits in the La Liga top-five, which is rounded out by Real Sociedad. Villarreal and Granada, respectively in seventh and eighth right now, have made the Europa League round-of-16. Real Betis replaced Villarreal, beaten 0-2 by a Joao Felix-inspired Atletico, in sixth following a 1-0 outcome against Cadiz CF. Levante and Athletic Bilbao are currently occupying the last two spots in the top half.

BUNDESLIGA

Amid its successful FIFA Club World Cup campaign in Qatar and Champions League first-leg triumph over Lazio, Bayern Munich hasn't experienced the best form in the 2020-21 Bundesliga. The Bavarians were held to a 3-3 draw by relegation-threatened Arminia Bielefeld before being stunned 1-2 by fourth-placed Eintracht Frankfurt. However, a thumping 5-1 victory over FC Koln kept the league leader on top at the end of round 23. Meanwhile, RB Leipzig's fifth consecutive win in the competition, a 3-2 result against Borussia Monchengladbach, took it to just two points off Bayern. Wolfsburg stayed third after defeating Hertha Berlin 2-0, while Frankfurt let a lead slip to

Striking early: Romelu Lukaku (exteme left), opens the account for Inter Milan against Genoa in a Serie A match at the San Siro Stadium in Milan. AP

suffer a 1-2 loss at Werder Bremen in its most recent outing. Scoring seven goals and keeping clean sheets in both of its last two encounters, Borussia Dortmund moved above Bayer Leverkusen, which was eliminated from the Europa League alongside Hoffenheim, into fifth. Union Berlin, Monchengladbach, Stuttgart and Freiburg close out the top-10. Bayern striker Robert Lewandowski leads the Golden Boot race with 28 goals from 22 appearances.

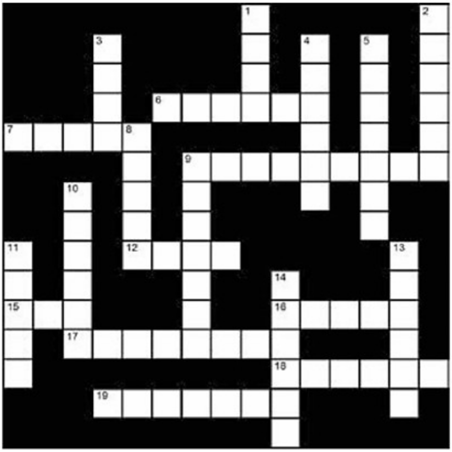
SERIE A

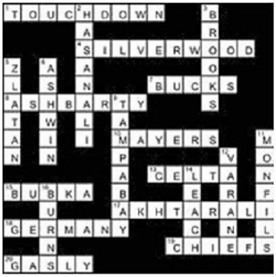
Inter continued its dominance in the 2020-21 Serie A as it moved four points clear at the top. The Nerazzurri thumped city rival AC Milan 3-0 in the derby clash before blanking Genoa and extending its unbeaten streak in the league to eight games. Romelu Lukaku continued his excellent run of form by scoring and assisting in both encounters. On the other hand, second-placed Rossoneri, who will face Man United next in the Europa League, put behind the loss to Inter and overcame AS Roma 2-1 in a thrilling away contest. Roma slipped to fifth with the result as Atalanta's 2-0 victory over Sampdoria propelled it a spot up. Record 36-time Italian top-division winner Juventus dropped even more points on the road against Verona. Cristiano Ronaldo's first-half goal wasn't enough as the Bianconeri, who are in third right now with a match in hand and lost their Champions League away-leg to FC Porto, were held 1-1. After putting one over Benevento, Napoli entered the top-six once again at the expense of Lazio, which was outsmarted by Bologna.

LIGUE 1

The 2020-21 Ligue 1 title race has heated up over the last few weeks. Only four points separate table-topper Lille (59) and fourth-placed Monaco at the 27-match mark. After beating Barcelona 4-1 in the Champions League, defending champion Paris Saint-Germain slumped to a 0-2 defeat against Monaco in the French league. But PSG cut short Lille's lead at the top to two with a 4-0 win over Dijon. Following its exit from the Europa League at the hands of Dutch outfit Ajax, Lille played out a 1-1 draw against Strasbourg. Lyon, currently in third, garnered a solitary point at Marseille in a game that had a similar scoreline. With PSG being the only active side from the country in European competitions this season, Lille, Lyon and Monaco can possibly try to break away from Mauricio Pochettino's men in the title race, considering the crammed fixtures in March and April. Les Parisiens forward Kylian Mbappe continues to lead the goal scoring charts in France, finding the back of the net 18 times.

CROSSWORD SRIRAM SRINIVASAN





SOLUTION TO LAST FORTNIGHT'S CROSSWORD

ACROSS

6 The Narendra Modi Stadium is in this neighbourhood of Ahmedabad. (6)

7 Osaka beat her in the finals of the Australian Open recently. (5)

9 The Timberwolves are from here. (9)

12 National bowling coach who quit just a few days after his appointment. (4)

15 When this occurs in badminton, the rally stops and is replayed without any change to the score. (3)

16 ... Kazbekovich Karatsev, Russian tennis player. (5)

17 World No. 1 in chess, and a professor at Shenzhen University. (3,5)

18 Pelicans' player Brandon ... (6)

19 A double 125cc world champion and MotoGP team owner, he died recently. (7)

DOWN

1 Australian cricketer .. Avon Richardson. (4)

2 The only Indian in the list of top-10 women chess players now, not counting Humpy, is ... (6)

3 If he hadn't been run out of the last ball of England's innings, there would have been no Super Over in the 2019 World Cup finals. (4)

4 Gloveman Benjamin Thomas... (6)

5 Italian football club based in Calabria. (7)

8 The Y in this cricketer's nickname SKY stands for this. (5)

9 Weightlifter Saikhom ... Chanu. (7)

10 US golfer Jordan ... (6)

11 The name of the PSL Peshawar team. (5)

13 New Zealander who has just joined the elite list of those who have scored five straight 50s in T20 matches. (6)

14 The name that connects tennis player Medvedev and chess GM Dubov. (6)

Creditable show: Team India which finished second overall. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Youth power to the fore

Y. B. SARANGI

The Indian contingent bagged 12 medals, including five golds, at the Adriatic Pearl tournament, which also featured boxers from Europe and ex-Russian countries.

Several flight cancellations, a circuitous route and a last-minute change of venue in Montenegro could not distract the Indian youth boxers who gave a splendid performance in the Adriatic Pearl tournament.

"We had to book flight tickets five times due to cancellations and go through different visa formalities. Finally, they took a flight from Chennai to reach Montenegro. Just a few days before the event, the host city, Budva, was locked down due to COVID and the event was shifted to Bar. The good thing is that the young boxers got some exposure," said Boxing Federation of India executive director R. K. Sacheti.

The Indian contingent bagged 12 medals, including five golds, from the event which also featured boxers from Europe and ex-Russian countries.

"I was surprised that none of them complained about the delays and other inconveniences. They were so excited and hungry to compete that the distractions did not bother them," said head coach Bhargav Bhatt.

The exposure was an ideal one ahead of the World youth championships in Kielce, Poland, in April.

"Our main objective was to gauge where our boxers stand after a year's inaction. Technically our boxers were very good. We need to work on their fitness," said Bhatt.

Bhatt was happy that some experiments, including fielding Vinka in 60kg instead of 64kg, worked. "She was chosen the Best Boxer among women. We have got several good boxers."

Babyrojisana Chanu, a Mary Kom Academy product who won the 51kg gold and earned the moniker 'Chhota Tyson' because of her explosive performance, said, "I learnt how to fight a southpaw and beat one in the final."

The Indians will work on their game in March before flying to Poland in early April to acclimatise themselves before the World championships. ✪

Laudable: Officials interacting during the National table tennis championship. All safety measures were in order during the nine-day championship, including a day of rest. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A safe and smooth Nationals

It was a challenge to hold an incident-free event in these times and the Table Tennis Federation of India came out with flying colours.

RAKESH RAO

Globally, these are 'testing' times for humanity. The challenges posed by Covid-19 have influenced the very inherent nature of trusting a fellow human. As things stand, unless one is medically certified as negative following a Covid test, he or she does not qualify to enter certain States. Indeed, it is better to be safe than sorry, but a certain percentage of our population continues to defy safety protocols aimed at preventing the spread of the pandemic.

In such a background, holding any National-level sporting event is a huge challenge. Though the on-field action has resumed in several sports, not all organisers have maintained strict safety measures.

After the disastrous conduct of the recent National wrestling championship in Noida and Agra, both in Uttar Pradesh, the National table tennis championship in Panchkula (Chandigarh) was bound to come under scrutiny.

It must be said the measures taken by the Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) to ensure the safety of players, coaches, officials and other stakeholders were of very

Fine show: The men's singles winner G. Sathiyan (second left) with runner-up Sharath Kamal (left), and semifinalists S. F. R. Snehit (second right) and Manav Thakkar.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

high order. Each one was required to arrive with their negative RT-PCR test report. Moreover, arrangements were in place to carry out these tests at the venue, free of cost. With Deputy Chief Minister of Haryana Dushyant Chautala being the TTFI President, the State health ministry swung into action and carried out all testing procedures smoothly and promptly.

"More than 500 tests were carried out and I'm very happy to announce that all were negative," declared M. P. Singh, who ended his tenure as the TTFI secretary a day after the conclusion of this event.

These tests apart, all other safety measures were in order during the nine-day championship, including a day of rest.

Only those players whose matches were scheduled were allowed to enter the playing hall. With 12 tables in use at the sprawling Tau Devi Multi-purpose hall, only 24 players, 12 umpires and a few more officials on the technical table were allowed in the field of play in any session. Even during practice-sessions, only two players could use the assigned table.

At the start of a match, following the toss, a player could choose one side of the table. Thereafter, the players could not switch sides. The team of technical officials, under a highly-competent N. Ganeshan, followed the guidelines. They all wore masks, gloves and maintained social distancing. Each table tennis ball was sanitized before it was used again, and so was the entire field of play at the conclusion of each session.

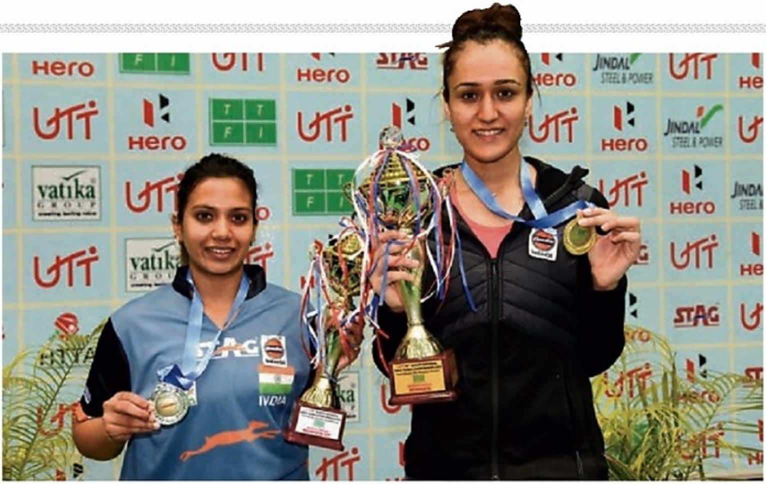
Sanitizer-dispensers were installed at all strategic points. Those entrusted with the responsibility of transporting the players/officials from the hotel to the venue also followed the protocols. Those incharge of catering at the venue, too, were under strict orders to maintain Covid norms.

For a change, the team championship and all three doubles events dropped from the schedule. That left only the women's and the men's singles. Four days were allotted for each category and that, in turn, meant the schedule was far from taxing. As a result, there was no pressure on the technical officials to maintain clock-like precision. "Everything is going on so well. There is no room for complaints as the organisers have done a splendid job," said former National champion Madhurika Patkar, a recipient of Arjuna Award in 2020.

Even a junior international like Swastika Ghosh said, "Once you enter the field of play, it is almost like playing in an international event. Everything is in order."

With the National team scheduled to leave for Doha, immediately after the championship, for four events including the two qualifiers leading to the Olympic Games, the TTFI ensured the same brand of table and ball was used in the competition.

"This is indeed a splendid move," said



On a roll: Women's champion Manika Batra (right) with runner-up Reeth Rishya.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

nine-time champion Sharath Kamal on the day of rest that separated the women's event from the men's competition. "When it was suggested to the TTFI to look at the possibility of using the same brand, the TTFI said it already had them in stock. This move should surely help us in Doha."

G. Sathiyan, the eventual champion, was all praise for the arrangements. "Top class venue and arrangements. I am sure we can hold international events here. Everything seems in order. Indeed, the TTFI has done a splendid job."

Once the action commenced, Manika Batra went on to regain the title. Former champion Archana Kamath tested her to the hilt in the quarterfinals. Reeth Rishya, the runner-up who had her moments in the final, admitted she did not expect to reach this far in the competition. On her way, Reeth knocked out defending champion Sutirtha Mukherjee.

This was also a great opportunity for a youngster like Sreeja Akula and all-attacking Takeme Sarkar. Sreeja challenged Manika in patches in the semifinal but her lack of self-belief stopped her from finishing the job strongly.

Takeme, known to possess only one gear, could not get past a more organised Reeth in their semifinal.

Among the men, Sathiyan deservedly won his first National title by denying Sharath Kamal his 10th! Sathiyan, the only Indian to break into the top-25 of world rankings, saw off the resurgence of Sharath who bounced back from 0-2 to make it 2-2 and even led briefly in the third game. But overall, Sathiyan appeared far more inspired and hungry to win than any other competitor.

Besides Sathiyan's triumph, the championship will be remembered for the splendid run of 20-year-old Hyderabadi S. F. R. Snehit. The reigning National youth titleholder knocked out last year's winner and Commonwealth champion Harmeet Desai 4-0, besides higher-ranked rivals like Ronit Bhanja and Sushmeet Sriram on his way to the semifinals.

In the semifinal, Snehit jumped to 10-2 against Sathiyan in the opening game but nerves got the better of him. He dropped the next eight points. He managed to force another game-point at 11-10, but Sathiyan was not to be denied. Thereafter, the youngster could not get over this missed opportunity and Sathiyan advanced without being tested any further.

Overall, the conduct of the championship towered over the quality of play on display. Indeed, it was a challenge to hold an incident-free event in these times and the TTFI came out with flying colours. In these times, if other National sports federations plan to hold their National championship, they can surely learn a lot from the roadmap executed by the TTFI. ⓢ

INTRODUCING THE JURY

Six eminent personalities will go through the voting and choose the winners of the Popular Choice Awards from the shortlisted candidates. They will also decide the 12 Jury Awards – National Team of the Decade, Coach of the Decade, Sportsman of the Decade **(Track & Field),** Sportswoman of the Decade **(Track & Field),** Sportsman of the Decade **(Individual non-Olympic Sports),** Sportswoman of the Decade **(Individual non-Olympic Sports),** Parathlete Sportsperson of the Decade **(Male),** Parathlete Sportsperson of the Decade **(Female),** Best State for the Promotion of Sports, Best PSU for the Promotion of Sports, Best Corporate for the Promotion of Sports and Lifetime Achievement Award.

Sunil Gavaskar

Ever since he bid adieu from the great game of cricket a little over three decades ago, Sunil Gavaskar, one of the sport's legends, has carved a niche for himself as a media personality. His punditry is looked forward to by the faithful when India's cricketers are seen in action in whites as well as in blues, and also during the signature events, be it in Asia or in the rest of the world under the aegis of the International Cricket Council (ICC). The former batting maestro plays badminton and follows most other sports that come under the ambit of the multi-discipline Olympic arena and appeals to a vast majority of the Indian populace.

M. M. Somaya

M. M. Somaya has had a distinguished sports career. Having represented his home state Maharashtra at the junior level in hockey, football and athletics, he eventually chose hockey as his game of true calling. Playing in the right-half position, Somaya has had the distinction of taking part in three Olympic Games — Moscow, 1980; Los Angeles, 1984; and Seoul, 1988. He was a member of the team that won the Olympic gold in Moscow in 1980 and was captain of the Olympic team at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Besides this, he has represented the country at two World Cups, two Asian Games and three Champions Trophies, among other major tournaments. The government of India honoured Somaya with the Arjuna Award in 1985 for his achievements in hockey.

Viswanathan Anand

Viswanathan Anand is one of the greatest sporting icons of our time. He was the first Asian to win the world chess championship and single-handedly transformed India into a major power in the mind sport. A five-time world champion, he is still a force to reckon with at the highest level. Two years ago, he won the World rapid chess championship at the age of 48. He is a pure genius. He is remarkably articulate, polite to a fault and the nicest World champion — in any sport — you could ever hope to meet. He was, in fact, thought to be too nice to finish first, until he emerged as the World champion in 2000.

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Anjali Bhagwat

For many years, Anjali Bhagwat had no equal on the distaff side of shooting, a sport that demands a high degree of excellence in the technical aspects. The first woman to break the glass ceiling in shooting, Anjali proved to be an expert in the 10m air rifle and rifle three positions. She has won a mind-boggling 31 gold medals, 23 silver medals and seven bronze medals in various international meets such as the SAF Games, Commonwealth Games, Asian Championships, Asian Games and World Cups. Anjali's stupendous achievements won her admirers as well as the Arjuna and the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna awards. She is coaching at the grassroots now. She is also a media personality invited by television channels to share her expert opinion.

Aparna Popat

For a decade starting in 1997, Aparna Popat remained the undisputed queen of Indian badminton. She won nine consecutive national singles titles — a record. Coached by Anil Pradhan, Prakash Padukone, Vimal Kumar and Ganguly Prasad at different stages of her illustrious career, Popat was the first woman shuttler to represent India at two successive Olympic Games (2000 and 2004). Achieving a best world ranking of 16, she won two singles medals and one team medal at the Commonwealth Games and was honoured with the Arjuna Award for the year 2005.

Bhaichung Bhutia

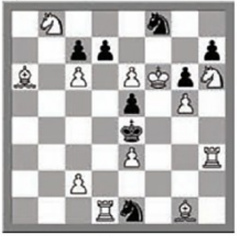
Hailed as the torchbearer of Indian football in the modern era, Bhaichung Bhutia revolutionised the sport in the country in the 21st century. Bhutia was the guiding light for footballers in the country for two decades with his unmatched skills and leadership on the field. He has played for multiple clubs but became synonymous with East Bengal, which recognised him as the most valuable player when the club turned 100. With the national team, Bhutia won the SAFF Championships three times and also won the AFC Challenge Cup in 2008, which enabled India to compete in the AFC Asian Cup for the first time since 1984.

Pick of Pickaninny

by C.G.S.Narayanan

Pickaninny, the four moves of a black pawn from it initial square, the popular black defence can not only be combined with other themes but also can be engaged in a duel with individual white pieces in direct mates.In this article I present here two duels in three-move compositions. In the first one (see diagram below) white bishop counters the Pickaninny moves in style.

A.Feoktistov
4 Pr,64,Shakmatnoe Obozrenie 2015

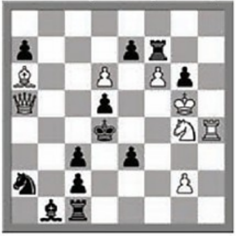


Mate in three moves

After the waiting **key 1.Ke7!** white's second move continuations after the BPd7 moves are met by the WBa6.
1...dxc6 2.Bb7 threatening 3.Bxc6
1...dxe6 2.Be2 (2.Rh4) BN any 3.Bf3
1...d6 2.Bc4 threatening 3.Bd5
1....d5 2.Bd3+ Nxd3 3.cxd3
(d5 square is self- blocked!)
1...Nxe6 2.Nxd7(2.Nf6)
1...Ne1 any2.Bd3+ Kd5 3.e4
There are three tries which leap to the eye.1.Nxd7? (2.Nc5) Nd3! 1.Be2? (2.Rh4) Nxe6! And 1.Ng4 (2.Nf2) Nf3! cuts off WR guard to e3.

The second problem features duel between Pickaninny(WPe7)and WNg4. The R+N battery on the fourth opens up four times, each time the destination square of WN is different.

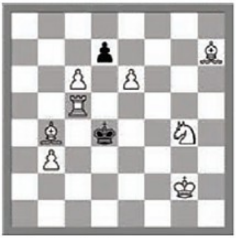
A.Kuzovkov
2Pr,Shakmatnaya kompozinsiya 2015



Mate in three moves

Key 1.Be2! (threatens 2.Qxa7+ Ke4 3.Bf3) 1...exd6 2.Nf2+ Ke5 3.Re4(pin mate) 1...exf6+ 2.Nxf6+ Ke5 3.Qxd5 1...e6 2.Nh6+ Ke5 3.Nxf7 and 1..e5 2.Nh2+ e4 3.Nf3 (pin mate) The by play 1...a6 2.Qb6+ Ke4 3.Bf3 and 1..Ke4 2.Bf3+ K any 3.Qxd5

A pickaninny in Meredith to solve.
E.Af Hallstrom
Suomen Shakki 1948



Mate in three moves

Solution to problem for solving in the article 'Combination of Pickaninny with Nowotny': **Key 1.c8N!** (2.Bc7+ Bd6 3.Bxd6)

Readers may send in their queries to cgsnarayanan@hotmail.com

LO INDIA UNIVERSITY GAMES ODISHA 2020
AMPIONS

Karnataka to host Khelo India varsity Games 2021

Karnataka will be the host state of the second Khelo India University Games (KIUG) scheduled to be held later this year. The announcement was made by the Chief Minister of Karnataka, B. S. Yediyurappa, and Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, Kiren Rijiju. The Games will be held in Bengaluru's Jain University and other venues in the state, in partnership with the Association of Indian Universities (AIU).

The first edition of KIUG was held in Bhubaneswar in February 2020, and saw a total participation of 3,182 athletes in the under-25 age group, across 158 universities and colleges from all states.

This year, Yogasana and Mallakhamb have been added to the University Games, with an effort to preserve and promote the century-old sporting disciplines of the country.

With the inclusion of these disciplines, the athlete participation figure is expected to cross 4,000 in 2021. The games will be conducted in the under-25 age category in accordance with the World University Games norms this year as well.

Speaking about being the host State, Yediyurappa said, "We are privileged to be hosting KIUG 2021. I am confident that the Games will produce some of the best future champions of India."

■ TEAM SPORTSTAR

Anand is mentor for 'Global Chess League'

Tech Mahindra Ltd has signed Viswanathan Anand, five-time world chess champion, as the mentor for the "phygital" (physical and digital) Global Chess League.

The league will have eight franchisee-owned teams from across the world. The teams will comprise a mix of titled women and men players along with juniors and wildcard entrants playing each other in a round robin format. The teams qualifying for the semifinals will enter the knockout stage of the championship.

Anand said: "Chess is a game that is played by millions around the world. At this time, a unique opportunity exists to popularise it further and dramatically enhance its visibility through a global league powered by technology.

"I am personally happy to partner with a technology provider like Tech Mahindra, whose endorsement and promotion will certainly elevate the sport to a higher level and offer the right platform to popularise chess across the globe."

■ TEAM SPORTSTAR

National Cross Country: Parasappa, Sonika triumph

Parasappa Madevappa Hajilol of Karnataka and Haryana's Sonika were crowned the National Cross Country 10km champions at the 55th edition of the event in the ATS Golf Meadows near Chandigarh.

The 25-year-old Hajilol from Bijapur, who clocked 31 minutes, 13.21 seconds, surprised several seasoned favourites including defending champion Anish Thapa Magar in a race that began under a blanket of fog, which only made conditions more difficult for the 224 runners in the men's section.

The women did not have any such weather difficulties and 21-year old Sonika completed the race in 37 minutes, 9.53 seconds, ahead of Maharashtrian Komal Jagdale in the 173-strong field. Defending champion Kavita Yadav was relegated to fourth. Defending champion Services managed to retain the men's team title ahead of Railways with each of its top-four runners finishing in the top 10. Among the women, Haryana upset Railways for the top spot.

The results: Men's 10km: 1. Parasappa Madevappa Halijol (Kar, 31:13.21), 2. Vikram Bangriya (MP, 31:15.21), 3. Adesh Yadav (Mah, 31:19.41).

Women's 10km: 1. Sonika (Har, 37:09.53), 2. Komal Chandra Jagdale (Mah, 37:11.40), 3. Nikita Raut (Mah, 37:12.71).

■ UTHRA GANESAN

Star sprinter Hima Das now a police officer

Star sprinter Hima Das was inducted as a Deputy Superintendent of the Assam Police in the presence of Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and described the moment as a childhood dream coming true.

Hima was handed the appointment letter by Sonowal, also a former Union Sports Minister, at a ceremony attended by the top functionaries of the state government as well as from the police department, including the Director General of Police.

Addressing the gathering after her induction as DSP, the 21-year-old Hima revealed that she had dreamt of becoming a police officer when she was young.

"People here know and I am not going to say anything different. Since my early school days, I harboured a wish to become a police officer one day and my mother also wished that.

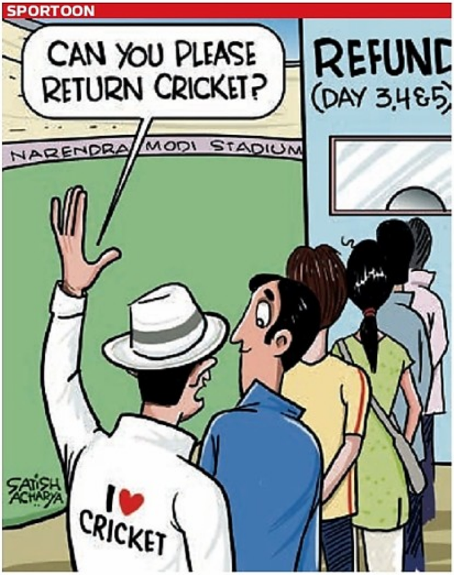
"I got everything due to sports, I will try to work for betterment of sports in the State and try to make Assam one of the best performing States in the country, like Haryana," she said.

"I will diligently work for Assam police, but I must say sport will never take a back seat."

Sonowal said Hima's appointment as DSP will motivate the youth to pursue excellence in sports.

■PTI

SPORTOON



Tough competition: Players of Sona Polo and Chandna Group teams in action during the Rajmata Gayatri Devi Memorial Cup polo match at Polo Ground in Jaipur, Thursday, February 25, 2021. PTI

FITNESSWISE

RAMJI
SRINIVASAN

Run faster and further

The best bet is to work with professional strength and conditioning coaches with an individualised schedule and a proper periodised regime. Here are some points to note.

Eye on the clock: The first thing to do is calculate your pace in the initial run, noting down the time to cover a particular distance. Depending on this reading, set up your training regime to reduce the time taken to cover that distance.

GETTY IMAGES & K. R. DEEPAK

Building an endurance base and setting new goals in pushing yourself to reach the target time play very important roles in the overall fitness of a professional. And the new buzzword in endurance training is the 2k run, which has become mandatory for all cricketers to prove their fitness levels.

We have a few ways to reach the target through proper processes and protocols. We will look at not only cricket, but other sports too, as we look to enhance fitness levels to international standards.

The first thing to do is calculate your pace in the initial run, noting down the time to cover a particular distance. Depending on this reading, set up your training regime to reduce the time taken to cover that distance.

I have not suggested any workout schedule here in a generalised way since every athlete is unique to his or her sport and skills. The best bet is to work with professional strength and conditioning coaches with an individualised schedule and a proper periodised regime. This can be heart rate variability training, velocity-based training, Triphasic training, et cetera.

Some points to ponder:

Prepare to uneasiness

Embarking on a running regime can be very daunting. Pushing oneself against time in a race can be a real challenge, with loads of discomfort, breathlessness and soreness. This can be overcome as the body get accustomed to the increased running. This is the first step towards success.

Run more often

Set up a weekly mileage pattern. Some people prefer to run daily, while others twice weekly. If one is to see an improvement in pace and timing, one needs to hit the ground running at least thrice a week, with specific goals for each session.

Perfect your running mechanics

It has been proven that proper running mechanics can shear valuable seconds or even minutes off your timing in races. Making minor adjustments to your posture, arm movement or foot position can increase the efficiency of your running — i.e. decrease your energy expenditure. This is a point that is often neglected.

Count your strides

This is another factor that is often overlooked. Measure the length and frequency of your stride. For example, for a 5k at a particular pace and note the time when your right foot hits the ground. Double this to know your stride frequency. As you monitor and improve your stride frequency, you'll become a more efficient and better runner with low levels of fatigue and discomfort. The most efficient elite runners will have a high stride turnover. By increasing your stride turnover, you can run faster and further.

Many coaches put the target stride rate at about 180 steps per minute. But there can be substantial variation, especially with highly trained runners. Studies have shown that elite runners modulate their stride rate, even increasing it to 190 per minute from 210-216 per minute during races. Thus, research suggests that the best stride rate is highly individualised among elite runners.

Schedule tempo runs

Tempo runs, or runs at a slightly slower pace, help you develop your anaerobic threshold, which is important for running faster. Many fast runners schedule at least one tempo run each week. Anaerobic threshold is the exertion at which the body switches from aerobic metabolism to anaerobic metabolism.

Do speed work

Speed work is intended to help you run faster. One way to do such workouts is to practise structured interval training. This involves covering a specific distance in a specific time for shorter distances with specific rest ratios between each set. Intensity is key here.

Practice fartleks

"Fartlek" is a Swedish word that means "speed play." Fartleks are simple, quick bursts of speed that vary in distance and intensity. There are modest ways to incorporate fartleks in your runs to help you get faster. A simple way is to target markers on the grounds; sprint from one to the next, then recover between the next two. Time and duration in fartlek training are important for increasing speed in the long run.

Incorporate hill or beach training

Running on a hill or a beach can improve your running economy and efficiency. Uphill running helps in developing a good knee drive and lower foot contact with the ground. With good posture, this in turn helps in increasing speed. Beach running helps in increasing stability and works on the hip- and knee-stabilising muscle groups. Running on the beach uses up 1.6 times the amount energy as running on a firm surface.

Tempo runs or intervals or fartlek sessions can be incorporated in hill and beach training.

Recover properly

This is the most underrated protocol. Many feel it's a waste of time or they feel guilty in taking a break. Little do they realise the extra edge in performance that a break gives them. Recovery is important in injury prevention and workload management.

Follow a proper training plan

The most important step is devising a proper training plan. A target-based training module with a good template for other supporting fitness components is critical for overall fitness. Strength and conditioning coaches in tandem with physiotherapists can design individualised schedules with block, undulated or random periodisation modules. Athletes need to adhere to this plan to see results in a progressive manner.

This is the first of a two-part series on endurance training. Read the second part in the April 17 issue of Sportstar.

An Aussie hand in India's success

Frank Tarrant, who scored nearly 18,000 runs and claimed over 1500 wickets in first-class cricket, is now guaranteed a measure of immortality thanks to Mike Coward's latest: *Cricket's Forgotten Pioneer: The Frank Tarrant Story.*

SURESH MENON

Among the pioneers of Indian cricket are Maharajahs and Nawabs, Englishmen and an Australian, Frank Tarrant, who scored nearly 18,000 runs and claimed over 1500 wickets in first-class cricket.

Tarrant was beginning to slide out of history, but is now guaranteed a measure of immortality thanks to Mike Coward's latest: *Cricket's Forgotten Pioneer: The Frank Tarrant Story*. It is a jewel that reflects the light from decades past.

Tarrant had a long and varied career as player, coach, administrator, groundsman and umpire. He helped prepare the Indian team for their first-ever Test at Lord's in 1932, umpired the first two Tests played in India in 1933-34, helped lay the wicket at Brabourne Stadium, and organised the first tour to India by an Australian team in 1935-36. This was sponsored by his patron the Maharajah of Patiala.

The Indophile Coward's passion for the game is matched only by his compassion for its players and supporters. He says that although Allan Border and Sunil Gavaskar have inalienable rights to the trophy which bears their name, "Tarrant deserves greater recognition and a rarefied place in the game's history."

While the English pioneers have been feted, Australians have not garnered the same attention, although Australians have written some of the finest books on Indian cricket. Coward himself wrote *Cricket Beyond the Bazaar*, a charming, elegant history of cricket between the two countries.

The Tarrant story is fascinating. His father turned him into a left-arm spinner by tying his right arm behind his back while bowling, and in years he became the first man in Australia to clean bowl Jack Hobbs. Coward's attention to such details brings alive Tarrant, a man, he says, with "unerring self-belief and more than a little pizzazz."

The English patron, wrote the Australian historian Richard Cashman, "regarded the game along idealistic lines," while the Australian "viewed cricket in more pragmatic terms... achieving upward social mobility through Indian cricket."

Multi-talented: Frank Tarrant (left) had a long and varied career as player, coach, administrator, groundsman and umpire.
THE HINDU PHOTO LIBRARY

As umpire Tarrant warned Douglas Jardine not to try Bodyline in India after his fast bowlers appeared to do so. Jardine complained and had him removed for the third Test. In the 1930s, Australia's knowledge of Indian cricket was interesting. "It seemed to be largely based on the use and abuse of positions of power and privilege," writes Coward. Any comment here would be superfluous!

In the end, after much negotiation, Australia sent a team whose average age was 35. Skipper Jack Ryder was 45, Charlie McCartney was 48, Bert Ironmonger 52. Three players Tarrant and the Maharajah of Patiala wanted were not sent: Bill Woodfull, Bill Ponsford and Alan Kippax.

It was another 20 years before the first official Australian team arrived in India and played a three-Test series.

Tarrant's second career as an importer of horses that won major races in India made him wealthy. "I made more money buying and selling horses in one year than I made in a lifetime's cricket," Tarrant said in an interview. Considering he played for 37 years, that is some achievement!

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